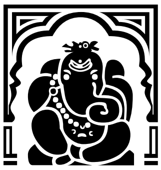
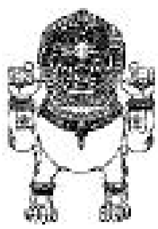
HINDUISM FOR BEGINNERS

An concise introduction to the Eternal Path to Liberation



By

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Foreword

There are two world religions which have formed the cultural and ethical basis of the world as we know it. Both have an unbroken history going back thousands of years. Judaism with a 5000 year old tradition is the mother of the western civilisation through its offshoot Christianity. Hinduism is the older of the two with a literature going back to the beginning of recorded history. Hindu civilisation originated in the Gangetic and Indus valleys and from there spread out over the entire region of southeast Asia. Its offshoot — Buddhism, shaped and molded the civilizations of Japan, China, Tibet and the rest of Asia. The Ancient pre-biblical kingdom of the Mittani in Asia minor was ruled by Hindu Kings with Sanskrit names! The Sumerians and the Hittites were both Indo-European people said to have originating in the Gangetic Basin. Hindu philosophy/theology influenced the ancient Greeks since the time Alexander the Great conquered parts of north India. A remarkable similarity has also been demonstrated between the religion and mythology of the ancient Scandinavian people and that of the people of India.

The ancient civilizations such as the Roman, the Greek, the Egyptian, the Sumerian, and the Babylonian have all passed away. Even the Jewish culture has undergone many radical changes since its inception 5000 years ago – yet the Hindu civilisation continues as a vibrant and living vector, and has remained virtually unchanged for over 6000 years. Today, Hindu communities are to be found in almost every country on earth.

Most books available on Hinduism in bookshops in the West today are written by non-Hindu Westerners. Most of them are very scholarly and recount the doctrines in a clinical manner, sometimes without any insight. Many of these scholars are in fact hostile to the very subject matter that they purport to recount in an impartial manner.

This book is written by a Westerner who is a practicing Hindu, to give non-Hindus as well as Hindus who are living in the West, an introduction to the faith. Its purpose is to give an over view with as few technical terms as possible and without too much detail. For those who are interested in reading further, libraries and specialty book shops will be able to provide a catalogue on the subject.

As a further aid to reading and understanding this book, I have used a few Sanskrit terms but have given their approximate translation each time. There is also a glossary of important English theological and philosophical terms in the appendix — I hope that this will make reading easier by removing the need for repeated reference to a dictionary.

Srirama Ramanuja Achari
Sydney 2005

PART 1

INTRODUCTION

HINDUISM is a term that was coined by foreign invaders of India to designate the traditional socio-religious systems of the people of 'Hind' or India. This term does not appear in any of the sacred literature of India. Hindus refer to their religion as *Sanatana Dharma* which loosely translated means "The Eternal Path". **Sanatana** means *eternal, perpetual* or *sustained*. **Dharma** means any method by which one sees reality for what it is, and that by which one is drawn closer to the Absolute Truth and Ultimate Reality — it is the *Philosophia Perenis.*

History & Development

Hinduism is a living religion which has evolved gradually over 7000 years. It has an unique in-built ability to adapt itself to changing circumstances. The most important of the lawgivers says:—

> "Any (so-called) dharma which will not lead to happiness and which is (generally) condemned in the people (loka-vikrusta) must be abandoned". (Manu 12;105-106)

This injunction directs the Hindu community to adapt its religious practices to the values of the society in which it finds itself. This is particularly appropriate today when there are growing communities of Hindu migrants in almost every western country — USA, Canada, Australia and Europe etc.

Hinduism flows from the misty past — some 6000 to 7000 years ago. The flow of Hinduism can be divided roughly into major periods of change and development. The ancient Indians were not interested in history as such, which is simply the records of kings and merchants written by the victors. The ancient Indian focus was always upon the spiritual development of humankind which is perennial and supra-mundane — dating is therefore an extremely problematic issue in matters relating to Hinduism and its development as seen through its literature.

The one verifiable and well documented historical event which we can be certain of was the advent of the Buddha. The dating of Hinduism is thus linked to the rise of Buddhism at about 500 BCE. Hindu history can therefore be divided into pre and post Buddhist developments. Buddhism arose from within Hinduism as a protest movement and in turn profoundly influenced the directional development of modern Hinduism. The mutually dependant and co-operative relationship can be studied in the history of the whole region of south-east Asia. The pre-Buddhist period was known as the Vedic Age, this gave way to the development of the

Tantric Age followed by the Upanishadic age which corresponds with the few centuries before and after the Buddha. The liberalism, universalism and rationalism of Buddhism in middle ages stimulated the ascendancy of *exclusive* Brahminical orthodoxy (smartas) and *inclusive* counter movements — the Devotional Sects (bhaktas).

Hindu teachers recognize the fact of their own historical development and do not lay claim to exclusivity or uniqueness in any way. There is no pretense that the religion descended from heaven and was the personal and unchangeable revelation of any one individual or that there was a "chosen" group of the "elect".

What Hinduism does claim is that it has, along with many other religions, universal and perennial Truths which are timeless and eternally valid. These Truths we will discuss later.

The Function of Religion

> *"The ideal function of religion is to provide a sound, fundamental world-view which correctly orientates the individual to the cosmos and thus can serve as the basis for an intelligent guide to living." (The Happiness Project pg 32)*

Religion verses Science

From the western perspective there is an irreconcilable chasm between religion and science. The two seem to be diametrically opposed to each other. Science views the world from an impersonal, objective point of view and religion views takes a personal subjective stance. The "truths" of science can be objectively proven but the "truths" of religion must be subjectively experienced. For a religion to be reconciled with science it needs to fulfill three requirements:—

1. It must accept all proven scientific facts as true.
2. It must reject any view which is contradicted by science.
3. Its beliefs must be based on observation, logic and experience.

Hinduism fulfills all these three conditions and so is perfectly in harmony with modern science.

Theology vs Philosophy

There is some confusion about the use of the terms "philosophy" and "theology" in relation to the Indian religious context. The difference between philosophy and theology is a Western concept. Philosophy strictly speaking is an inquiry into the nature of reality determined by

human reason alone, without reference to a divine revelation. The entire Hindu tradition is based on the realization of Great Sages (Rishis). Their insights into the Absolute are contained in texts known as the *Veda* which is considered to be transcendent, impersonal, free from bias and therefore authoritative.

The actual Sanskrit term used for philosophy/ theology is **Darshana** which simply means "a view of the Truth". Implicit in this term is the acceptance of a multifaceted way of seeing the Truth. All teachers of all religions are merely seeing one conditioned, provisional aspect of the Ultimate Reality — no one has a monopoly on Truth.

The law-giver Manu (12:6) says:—

> The person who uses reason & logic to investigate the teachings of the sages on Dharma — he alone and no one else truly knows.

The "Eternal Path" consists of inquiry and rational investigation into the nature of the Ultimate Truth (Brahman), which is then followed by the internalization of that realization through the harmony of mind and speech, and it's application in one's daily life through skilful action.

The Nature of Life

Why should one investigate the nature of Ultimate Reality? What is it that impels one to undertake the path of spiritual investigation and practice? All schools of Indian philosophy begin with the realization that life presents itself as the psycho-drama of universal *suffering*. The Gita (a Hindu Sacred Text) refers to this world as *"impermanent and the abode of suffering"*. These are the two outstanding characteristics of all phenomena. All sentient beings are suffering in some way or other and all are seeking freedom from suffering and the attainment of happiness.

The Nature of Suffering

"Suffering" in Sanskrit is called 'duh-kha' which literally means "bad-space". Happiness is 'su-kha' — "good space". A "bad" space is a closed and confined space which does not permit growth, learning, expansion of being and the unfolding of one's potential, a "good" space is an open and free space, one in which there is growth, unfoldment, learning and freedom. Duhkha can also be defined as the deferential between our expectations and what we actually achieve. The greater the differential between expectation and outcome the greater the intensity of the suffering. *Duhkha* is not a qualitative assessment of one's own life, but an *ontological thesis* — which means an objective statement about the human condition.

A comprehensive modern description of *Duhkha* is:—

> Disturbance, irritation, dejection, worry, despair, fear, dread, anguish, anxiety; vulnerability, injury, inability, inferiority; sickness, aging, decay of body and

faculties, senility; pain/pleasure; excitement/boredom; deprivation/excess; desire/frustration, suppression; longing/aimlessness; hope/hopelessness; effort, activity, striving/repression; loss, want, insufficiency/satiety; love/lovelessness, friendlessness; dislike, aversion/attraction; parenthood/childlessness; submission/rebellion; decision/indecisiveness, vacillation, uncertainty.

(Francis Story in *Suffering,* in Vol. II of *The Three Basic Facts of Existence.)*

Duhkha arises from three sources:—

1. Self — issues relating to one's own body and mind complex.
2. Others — people, animals, objects etc.
3. Elemental— heat, cold, storms, volcanoes, earthquakes etc.

The general ontological (science of being) suffering common to all sentient being is codified by the doctrine of the *six afflictions* (*shat-kleshas*).

1 The act of being born causes suffering to both mother and baby.

2 Sickness is universal and when examined from a microbiological point of view the body is constantly at war with invading pathogens — disease results when the body loses the battle. It would seem then that disease is inevitable and only temporarily being held at bay.

3 Hunger & Thirst.

4 Changes and transformation.

5 Old age — the degenerative process & social isolation and the inability to fulfil one's simple desires are sources of suffering.

6 Death — the fear of death as well as the actual process is the prime source of anxiety to all sentient beings.

One may retort that this is a very pessimistic view of life and that life should be regarded more optimistically as being full of opportunities, hope and joy. According to the Indian sages, joyfulness arises from the understanding of impermanence and suffering and the transcending of the causes of suffering which are a false identification with the mind/body complex.

Life in this mortal realm is in fact a mixture of both pleasure (sukha) and pain (duhkha). There is no pleasure in which there is not an element of pain and no pain in which there is not an element of joy. Cycles of joy alternate with cycles of grief. When one investigates more closely one finds that every thing and every state is temporary and fleeting like foam on water. So even pleasure when experienced, is only momentary, and even at the moment of enjoyment the fear of cessation of that joy arises. *Attachment* arises with the pleasurable experience and *aversion* from the unpleasant. After the experience has passed, attachment gives rise to craving for repetition and repeated experience of pleasure gives rise to *clinging.* This cycle of the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of suffering, craving and clinging are the principle causes of the lack of true

happiness. True happiness can only arise when one has overcome both attraction and aversion, clinging, craving and stopped the endless pursuit of happiness in that which is unstable and fleeting.

The Nature of Experience

Although every object of the senses is capable of giving pleasure; the same objects are also capable of causing suffering — all depending upon one's character, conditioning, and desires. At one time heat or cold is pleasurable and under other circumstances the same temperature is unbearable. Food taken when hungry causes great enjoyment, once satiation is reached the same food causes nausea and vomiting. Interest in sex is intensified up until the point of climax and then comes the anticlimax and sometimes total disinterest in the person who previously aroused lust. And so it is with all things — it is not the object *per se* that gives joy or sorrow but one's attitude towards the object. The mind is the source of the world we create for ourselves. Even one's attitudes are unstable and changing — love frequently turns to hate, satisfaction to disgust, praise to censure, attraction to aversion etc. Stability and continuity are not found either in the external physical world or the internal mental world and one is being swung like a pendulum from one extreme to the other — the tick-tock effect. In every episode of joy there is the seed of suffering and in every episode of suffering there is the seed of joy.

The Causes of Suffering

This cycle of suffering / dissatisfaction / dis-ease/ unhappiness is set in motion through attraction (*raga*) to the pleasurable and aversion (*dvesha*) from the unpleasurable. This swinging from one to the other is founded upon ignorance of one's true nature, thus the basis of unhappiness in the world is *spiritual ignorance* (ajñana or avidya).

The Hindu Paradigm of Life

The Hindu paradigm of life can be summarised as follows:

1 We are ignorant of our true nature, of who we really are.

2 We identify with the mind/body complex.

3 In order to validate our identity and give meaning to our existence, we create a vast network of false personalities and role-playing based upon the identification with the mind/body complex. We identify as humans, as members of a race, or country, as members of a family; spouse, sons, and daughters etc. We create identities as members of social groups, or we may join a number of various interest groups, we identify as professionals, as teenagers, as adults etc. etc.

4 These false identities then produce the three psychological forces of **attraction** for those people and objects which ratify and support our identities and roles, and **repulsion** from those that don't. We create divisions based on value judgments — "good" and "bad"; and various dynamics of "us" and "them". We then develop an **intense attachment** to these identities.

5 These three forces impel us to act in various ways predominantly conditioned by selfishness or self-promotion.

6 The actions lead to results which are either pleasurable, painful or neutral.

7 The experiences produce "indents" or "impressions" in the mind.

8 Subliminal activators, *Samskaras* or "seeds" are created which sink to the bottom of the mind and await some opportunity – usually triggered by some associative factor – in order to rise to the conscious mind and activate a desire or craving.

9 Groups of these *Samskaras* form an individual disposition — one's innate character.

10 Our character or disposition determines our tendencies to act in particular ways and to desire specific objects of self-gratification.

11 We then embark on a course of life through *Samsara* (cycle of birth and death) which leads to further entrenchment in the cycle of becoming and further suffering.

12 The way to break this cycle and to achieve perfect harmony and equilibrium is to pursue the path of Spiritual Knowledge — *vidya* or *jñana*



The Process of Spiritual Inquiry

> *Who am I? Why am I here? What is this world? How came death & birth? Thus inquire within yourself; great will be the benefit derived therefrom. (Annapurna Upanishad 1.40)*

This whole process of spiritual investigation can be summed up in a module of four questions;

1. Who am I ?
2. What am I doing here in this world?
3. What do I do next?
4. What is the nature of life?

1. *Who am I ?*

This inquiry consists of investigating the true nature of the Self (jivatman). This also includes by default, the inquiry into the nature of the Absolute Godhead (Brahman) to which we, as spiritual beings have an intimate relationship. This will be further dealt with in a later chapter.

2. *What am I doing here ?*

Once we have intellectually accepted that we are not what we think we are, we then turn our attention to the nature of the universe and our place in it. We investigate the nature of mundane reality, the origin of the universe and of living beings, and the inter-dependant relationship between various categories of animate and inanimate beings. We can then investigate the universal problem of unhappiness and the meaning of life and principally the subject of our duty (Dharma) towards other beings and the environment in which we live.

3. *What do I do next?*

Once we have gained knowledge about these topics we then have to seriously consider what we are going to do with that knowledge, that is, how to apply it in our daily lives. What do we do about our own personal suffering and that of others? A theory of "everything" which does not lead to some form of self-transformation and practical, universal application is simply cognitive reverie.

4. *What is the nature of birth and death?*

The fundamental premise of Hinduism is that birth and death are the two alternating phases in the seemingly endless cycle of transmigration. This cycle has been set in motion by ourselves in

the distant past, and the ultimate goal of all spiritual practice is to end this cycle. The cessation of this cycle of transmigration is known as "liberation" (*moksha* or the "end of becoming" — *nirvana*).

The Filters of Comprehension

It can be seen that our perception of the world and our place in it and the way in which these fundamental questions are asked and the way in which the knowledge will be received and applied, depends upon three essential subjective factors;—

1. Individual disposition (*svabhava*)
2. The level of intellectual and spiritual development (*bhumika*)
3. The ability or competency to understand, digest and respond. (*adhikara*)

The four questions and the three filters are the foundations upon which the massive edifice of spiritual teaching is constructed. There is no single dogmatic answer to any of the questions. Each person is an individual and each is at a different level of development with a different capacity to comprehend and respond — and it is this recognition of *fundamental difference* and *individuality* which is the parameter of the spiritual teaching of Sanatana Dharma. Each individual must walk the path alone, and each person must come to his/her own realization of the Truth. The Divine responds to us not *collectively* but individually, so that each person's experience of the Divine is different because each and every being is a ray of the Divine and is thus directly and intimately related to the Godhead. The union with the lover, which is the highest form of worldly pleasure is experienced by each person differently. In the same way each person will have their own way of approaching and relating to God.

Wisdom

Seek thou refuge in wisdom (Gita 2:49)
The knower of the Supreme attains the Supreme (Tai. U 2:1)

Sanatana Dharma insists that the mind *can* know the Truth through a process of *Inner Realization*. By the realization of the Truth one is liberated from suffering and achieves perfect happiness. This knowledge of the Truth is known as *wisdom* (jñana or prajña) and therefore the greatest of spiritual pursuits is the pursuit of knowledge which leads to wisdom. There are three tools for obtaining wisdom.

1. Hearing the teachings from a spiritual preceptor (guru)
2. Contemplating the teaching using reason and logic.
3. Application of the teaching.

The Hindu theory of knowledge

According to Hindu logic, "valid" knowledge is defined as (1) that which objectively reveals a thing as it really is and (2) has a subjective, meaningful, practical application. Theoretical knowledge may be scientifically true but it becomes "valid" (*prama*) only when it has a practical application in our lives as they are lived. The Hindu theory of knowledge thus bridges the chasm between science and religion, reconciling the subjective with the objective. Regarding the objective world and its bio-physical laws scientifically established facts are accepted as long as they have a subjective application.

There are three ways in which we can know about the world and life and acquire "valid" knowledge:

1. Direct personal perception or cognition (*pratyaksham*)
2. Inference — by reasoning and figuring things out for ourselves using given rules of logic. (*anumana*).
3. Accepting the teaching of an authority on the subject. (*shabda*)

As far as the material world is concerned the authority of the scientists is paramount and Hinduism has no dispute with their findings. On the other hand the authority of the Vedas and the teachings of the enlightened sages are accepted for all that cannot be investigated by the scientific paradigm. Where there is a conflict between Scripture (Veda) and science then the Vedic view is to be rejected. The teaching of the Veda is only accepted in regard to ethics and morals and paranormal subjects such as the Absolute Reality, Self, Dharma, goal of life etc.

There are also three levels of spiritual aspirants (*sadhakas*):

1. Those who simply follow the teaching authority (*guru*), faithfully and unquestioning.
2. Those who attempt to understand the teaching using reason.
3. Those who strive to realize the Truth for themselves.

Guru — Spiritual Preceptor

Sanatana Dharma is a living, experiential religion and therefore the centrality of the spiritual preceptor (*guru*) is absolute. No progress in the study of any serious subject such as law, medicine, engineering, music or dancing (or even sport) is possible without the guidance of a qualified teacher or practitioner. How much more important therefore is it to have the guidance of a teacher in the subject of spirituality? Most Westerners seem to regard religion as a diversion from their real lives in the mundane world. Regulations, conditions and intellectual standards that are accepted unhesitatingly, and indeed often demanded of worldly affairs are seldom if ever applied to spiritual matters. Christians will readily accept self-interpretation of the "Laws of God" but strenuously oppose any self-interpretation by others of judicial laws, traffic rules or

the rules of "workers compensation"! How many drivers would use the roads if every driver interpreted the road rules according to his/her particular fancy?

So it is that the Dharma must be received from a spiritual preceptor (guru). Each and every guru uses a different method of approach and will teach on different levels using different methods. These differing schools of teachings are known as **lineages** and come down in an unbroken line of Disciplic Succession from time immemorial. They are sometimes quite opposed to each other in their doctrines, philosophy, theology and methodology but the ways to Self-realization and enlightenment are as many as there are individuals. The terminology may differ, the methods certainly do, but the ultimate goal is the same — Liberation (nirvana or mukti).

False Gurus

Now there is a fundamental human flaw, and that is the propensity for self-promotion and to cheat. There have been, and indeed there are many so-called spiritual teachers who are cheating their followers and exploiting their gullibility — a phenomena which is not confined to the Hindu world alone but is also rampant in Christendom and all pseudo spiritual and "life-coaching" systems. How do we remedy this problem? Well the ancient sages who were fully enlightened and understood human nature in its totality of expression gave us guidelines. They insisted upon the examining of the guru by a prospective disciple. Firstly the indications of an enlightened being are **wisdom**, (*jñana*) **compassion** (*karuna*) and a **skilful action** (*Karmasu-kaushalam*) — perfection of practice and teaching; and a good sense of humor! The guru in order to be considered bonafide, has to fulfil certain conditions and these are:—

1. S/he must belong to an accepted and recognized lineage not a *do-it-yourself* one
2. The teaching must be in accordance with that of the lineage.
3. S/he must demonstrate a practice of the teachings (absence of hypocrisy and double standards).
4. The effect of the teaching upon the disciples must be observed to be beneficial and uplifting from a universal social, psychological and spiritual point of view — the effect must be to promote universal harmony among all beings and the earth.

Once the guru has passed this acid test and the prospective disciple is absolutely convinced and confident in the ability of the guru to impart wisdom, then only should a commitment be made and initiation requested.

Disciples

The guru-disciple relationship is like a marriage: both parties must be mutually compatible. And so there is also the need for the guru also to test the prospective disciple to ascertain;

1. the level of spiritual attainment,
2. sincerity and faith, and
3. the degree of commitment to the path of enlightenment.

The disciple once accepted, undergoes the sacrament of initiation (*Diksha)* — which is the formal acceptance and induction into the lineage. Thereafter the disciple (*shishya* or *chela*) is instructed in a spiritual practice that is suitable for his/her personal spiritual development.

The guru-disciple relationship, once formalized through the sacrament of initiation, is very intimate and transcends all other mundane relationships. The process of initiation is described as "the second birth" (*dvija janma*), and through it the guru becomes a spiritual parent and the disciple treats the guru with all the obedience, respect and honor that is due to a parent. Once the guru has been accepted his/her authority in spiritual matters should not be questioned — one needs to surrender to the process, but, if one finds the guru *doing* or *teaching* something which is contradictory or amoral, it is the responsibility of the disciple to point it out and to request an explanation. If this is not satisfactory the disciple is enjoined to leave the guru. No-one should ever follower a guru blindly, and any guru who demands *unquestioning* loyalty and discourages dissent is never to be followed.

Lineages

Within the fold of Sanatana Dharma there are many lineages with many sub-lineages. It is essential for any appreciation of the Hindu religion to grasp a basic understanding of the types and roles of the various lineages, otherwise one becomes totally confused by the variety and often contradictory doctrines. There are three major schools of Hindu (Vedanta) Philosophy:—

Non-dualism (*Advaita*)
Qualified Non-dualism (*Visishta-advaita*)
Dualism (*Dvaita*)

Non-dual Lineages

All the Non-dual lineages acknowledge the philosopher/theologian Shankaracharya as their greatest representative. Shankaracharya who lived in the eighth century established four pontifical seats and divided his disciples into 10 orders known collectively as the ***Dasa-namis*** or 'Monks of Ten-Names' because of the titles which are given to the monks. Most of the modern Yoga groups and Neo-Hindu organizations are affiliated to one of these branches.

Pontifical Seat	Titles of the Monks
1. Sringeri	Sarasvati, Bharati, Puri.
2. Dvarka (Sarada Math)	Tirtha, Ashrama
3. Puri (Govardhana Math)	Bana, Aranya
4. Badrinatha (Joshi Math)	Giri, Parvata , Sagara

Smartas

The majority of orthodox Hindus fall into a loose category known as *Smartas.* They worship the Godhead in all its manifestations but usually choose one particular form as the subject of their personal devotion (*ishtha deva*). Their philosophy/theology is generally the Non-dualism of Shankaracharya.

Qualified Non-dual and Dualistic Lineages.

These are the theistic schools which are subdivided into the Vaishnavas and the Saivas. The Vaishnavas who comprise the majority of believers in the north of India, worship the Supreme Godhead as *Vishnu* and the Saivas who are prominent in the South of India and Srilanka adore Him as *Siva*.

Vaishnavas

Vaishnavas are again subdivided into five lineages named after their most outstanding representatives. (1) Nimbarkas, (2) Madhvas, (3) Vallabhas and (4) Srivaishnavas (or Ramanujas) and (5) the Chaitanyas. All of these five lineages have numerous sub-sects, the largest of these lineages being the Srivaishnavas, followed by the Madhvas.

Saivas

There are six sects of Saivas known as (1) Pashupata, (2) Saiva- Siddhanta, (3) Vira-saiva (4) Kashmiri Saivism (5) Siva Advaita and (6) Siddha Siddhanta.

All these sects vary greatly in their customs, mores, traditions, dress and conduct. Their philosophical/theological doctrines too, vary from absolute Impersonalism on the one hand to intimate Personalism on the other, from henotheism through monotheism up to absolute monism. The Vaishnavas and the Saivas are all uncompromising monotheists.

The Principle Differences between the Personalists and the Impersonalists

God

Impersonalism

God is the 'Ultimate Reality' and is a Non-personal Being known as Brahman which means 'the Immensity'. It has no limiting adjuncts, qualities or attributes. This Absolute Reality is defined as Pure Existence (**sat**), Conscious-ness Absolute (**cit**), and Unlimited Bliss (**ananda**).

Personalism

God is *personal*. He possesses a transcendent divine form and has absolute Existence, Consciousness, Bliss, Eternity and Purity as His essential nature. His attributive qualities like love, compassion, mercy, solicitude, etc. are innumerable. He possess all the good attributes imaginable and is devoid of all negative ones. He possess Justice and Mercy and has an interest in saving the world. He redeems the world through incarnations and the bestowal of Grace.

The Self

Impersonalism

The individual Self is a reflection of Brahman embodied in a physical form, like the sun reflected in many pots of water. It is identical to Brahman and the difference is only apparent and not real.

Personalism

The Self is a part of God sharing His essential nature. The diffe-rence lies in the total dependence of the Self upon God, and the absolute independence, and omnipotence of God.

The Universe

Impersonalism

The world is impermanent and fleeting, it is actually an illusion (maya) and has no substantial reality. Like the idea of a snake superimposed upon a coiled rope seen in the dark. Once the light is turned on the notion of 'snake' in the rope disappears.

Once enlightenment or self-realisation is achieved the 'reality' of the world is negated.

Personalism

The world is impermanent but has substantial reality. The relationship between the universe and God is like that of the body to the Self. The two are separate; one being spirit and the other matter, but together they form one Unity.

As long as one is embodied the world continues to be a reality. The world is a means for practicing devotion and service to God.

Goal of Spiritual Life

Impersonalism

The ultimate goal of life is the realisation of the identity between Brahman and the Self and re-absorption back into the Whole — like the river entering into the sea and becoming one with it, implying a total loss of individuality.

Personalism

The ultimate goal is the realisation of our fundamental position as subservient and dependant on God and to dedicate our lives to His glorification and service. The goal is *eternal service*, not absorption into blissful oblivion.

The Unorthodox Tradition

Up to this point we have been reviewing the orthodox tradition which is taught by the gurus and pontiffs and is based upon the revelation of the Vedas — the Primary Scriptures of Hinduism. This orthodox tradition is also known as *Brahmanism* — meaning the teachings of the Brahmins or the path of those who believe in *Brahman* — the Absolute Reality. But in reality the majority of so-called 'Hindus' are profoundly ignorant of the great philosophical verities, theological traditions and schools and sects of their religion. Their ideas about the *Dharma* are vague and at best humanistic and popularistic, at worst conditioned by a conservative Victorian Christian educational system. Their customs and practices are based upon a hotchpotch of unsophisticated animism, superstition, spiritism and ignorance. These practices are known collectively as *gramachara* or the "practices of the village" or *lokachara* – "the customs of the people". This tradition has no defined concept of the Godhead, no understanding of the true nature of the Self nor doctrines of Liberation. The overriding concern with this type of *folk-religion* among the unsophisticated and uneducated masses is the propitiation of various predominantly malevolent godlings, demigods and spirits, through offerings and often blood sacrifices of animals, and among the western-educated classes takes the form of mere socio-ritual observance with little or no understanding of underlying metaphysical or philosophical principles.

So what is it all about?

Now you are no doubt totally confused about Hinduism! Western scholars with their penchant for neat categorization have attempted to classify Hinduism as "polytheistic" — meaning worshipping a number of different gods; or "henotheistic" — having many different gods but regarding one as superior to the others; "pantheistic" — believing that the universe is Divine and that God and Nature are the same. All of these categories apply is some way or other to one or other particular sect or philosophical school, but none of them adequately describe Sanatana Dharma as it is.

Sanatana Dharma has no founder, no dogma, no central teaching authority, no creed, no stock theology or generally accepted philosophy, no uniform customs or traditions, and above all insists that all religions are relatively true. So then, what holds it together? Where does one system end and the other begin? Who exactly is considered to be a Hindu? How does one know what the real thing is and what is not? What is the difference between Hinduism and its offshoots — Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism?

Who is a Hindu ?

The Mahabharata (Vana Parva 297;35) defines ***Sanatana Dharma*** as follows:—

> **"The Eternal Duty (Sanatana Dharma) towards all creatures is the absence of malevolence (prejudice) towards them in thought, deed or word, and to practice compassion and generosity towards them".**

Thus, according to this definition any who practices the above three things is a "Hindu" regardless of their theological or philosophical convictions.
India's Supreme Court, in a legal judgment handed down in 1966 has defined Hindus as:—

> *"those that accept the Vedas with reverence, recognize that the means of salvation are diverse, and realize that God can be worshipped in a large number of forms."*

A modern anthropological definition is:—

> *"Hinduism is the religion of those humans who create, perpetuate and transform traditions with legitimizing reference to the authority of the Vedas".*

(Exorcising the Transcendent; Strategies for defining Hinduism and religion 1987.)

The Vedas

What distinguishes Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism from orthodox Hinduism is the status of the Vedas as Sacred Scripture. The Vedas are a collection of hymns and writings in the Sanskrit language, concerned with ritual, spirituality, theology, ethics and morals which are traditionally accepted to be have been a record of the insights of fully enlightened beings known as Rishis. These revelations have existed from the beginning of time. Indological scholars date some of the texts to about 6000 BCE according to internal astronomical evidence. The Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs although retaining many of the basic doctrines, theological concepts and even rituals of Hinduism reject the Vedas as *Spiritual Authority.*

Anyone who accepts the Vedas as Spiritual Authority is considered to be a Hindu.

The Seven Basic Tenets

There are the seven basic tenets which are accepted by all schools of Hinduism. These are the pillars upon which the entire superstructure is built— like a huge multi-storied skyscraper. The common identity of all the people in the skyscraper is that they either work or live in this huge building, but their individual businesses or residences in the building vary greatly and sometimes may be quite disharmonious.

These basic tenets are:—

1. *Brahman* — The Unity of the Supreme Being,
2. *Atman* — the existence of an immortal Self,
3. *Samsara* — transmigration, evolution through rebirth back to Godhead
4. *Karma* — the moral law of cause and effect,
5. *Nirvana* — liberation for all sentient beings,
6. *Srishti*— the universal becoming
7. *Dharma* — duty, right living, ethics and morals

All these topics are vigorously investigated and elaborated upon by every orthodox sect within Hinduism but the conclusions vary somewhat — the Buddhists and Jains while also dealing with the above tenets avoid discussion about a 'Godhead' or refer to it as the *Sunya* or "Void" — which basically affirms the impossibility of comprehending the Ultimate Reality rather than asserting a doctrine of nihilism — and they also deny the reality of an immortal Self. I shall now attempt to give a brief general description of each of these topics.

1. Brahman — the Godhead

"Whence all being arise, by which they are sustained and into which they, departing hence, all ultimately return seek to known That! That is Brahman". (Taittiriya.Upanishad 3:1;2)

Hinduism teaches that there is ONE Supreme Reality— known as **Brahman** (The "Immensity") which cannot be described by speech and is intellectually inconceivable — but it can only be realized in deep states of meditation. It is **that** from which every conceivable thing arises, by which things exist and into which everything is ultimately dissolved. This Supreme Being assumes a dual nature — Male and Female. The male aspect is known as *Purusha* which means "that-which-fills" — and the Female aspect is known as *Shakti* which translates as "Energy" or

"Dynamic Force" or *Prakriti* — material nature. The *Purusha* and *Shakti* are philosophically distinguishable but inseparable in their being and cosmic function. If the Purusha is the *word*, Shakti is *the meaning*; if the Purusha is the *flower;* Shakti is the *smell*. Both the subjective Purusha and objective Prakriti arise from the same "Oneness".

In the beginning there was Being alone, One without a second. (Ch. U. 6;2:2)

Although we talk of God in the masculine, any mention of 'him' automatically includes reference to 'her' as well. The Godhead is the basis, source and support of everything in the universe. Its nature consists of the three incommunicable attributes of (1) Absolute Being (sat), (2) Consciousness (chit), (3) Bliss (ananda).

The Trinity (tri-murti)

The Supreme Brahman is both transcendent to the creation and immanent within it. It is at once the Creator, Sustainer and Destroyer of the cosmos. Although One and inconceivable, in order to interact with the physical universe which is projection of Itself, Brahman takes on a personal aspect known as **Isvara.** Isvara then further manifests in a threefold form. As **Brahma**, Isvara creates the universe with the aid of his Shakti **Sarasvati.** Brahma is the personification of the attribute of Being (sat) transformed in "becoming". As **Vishnu** he sustains the creation with the assistance of his Shakti **Lakshmi —** Vishnu is the personification of the attribute of Bliss (ananda) and as **Siva** he dissolves, transforms and recreates the universe with the help of **Kali** — Siva being the personification of the attribute of Consciousness (cit). These three are not separate *gods* but the supernal embodiments of the eternal cosmic dynamics of the centrifugal, centripetal and harmonising forces. This process can be likened to water vapour (Brahman) condensing into water (Isvara) and then solidifying into different shapes and forms as ice (the Trinity). Although different, all three substances are nothing but H2O.

The Personalists focus their devotion upon **Isvara** and stress his immanence in the creation and his attribute of Grace. The Impersonalists direct their meditative practices to the Impersonal Absolute aspect of **Brahman** and stress Its transcendence and total lack of attributes.

Fundamental to the Hindu perception of God is the recognition of culturally based and conditioned perceptions. The way a person views God is through specific social and cultural spectacles conditioned by time and place. Therefore Hinduism recognizes the validity of *all* religious experience of God and the expression of that experience through religious devotions and practices.

The Truth is ONE but the theologians speak variously. (Rig Veda)

The Incarnations.

> *Whenever there is a decline of Dharma, O Arjuna, and an increase of Adharma, then I incarnate Myself. For the protection of the good and for the destruction of the wicked, for the establishment of Dharma, I am born from age to age. (Bhagavad Gita 4.7-8).*

Isvara participates personally in the sustentation and emancipation of the world through voluntary incarnation. Isvara's incarnations are innumerable, he never limits his participation in the liberation of all sentient beings.

The purpose of the Incarnation is to re-establish the principles of spirituality, to re-establish equilibrium in the universe and to shower divine grace upon the devotees. As long as there are sentient beings to be emancipated from the cycle of birth and death, Isvara will continue to manifest himself. On this basis, all Hindus accept Jesus as one of the Incarnations of Isvara and as consubstantial with God. The problem arises with the absurd attempt to *limit* the Incarnation in time and place to a single and unique event!

There are three degrees of incarnation.

(1) Isvara chooses a human being and endows him with extraordinary powers for accomplishing some purpose. (e.g. Buddha)

(2) Isvara personally incarnates, but with a fraction of his total being (Rama) and

(3) complete incarnation with all the Divine Energy (Krishna).

The birth of the first two degrees of incarnation occur in the normal way through a normal couple who have been chosen because of their exceptional merit. In the case of Krishna, who is the only *complete Incarnation* , the birth was miraculous in that he manifested himself as an adult and then took the form of a baby.

There are Hindu schools of thought like the Arya Samaj which reject the doctrine of the Divine Descent (*Avatar*) and strictly uphold the transcendence of God (*Brahman*). They consider Krishna to be a great teacher but not the Incarnation of the Godhead.

2. Atman – The Self

That which is the subtle Essence of this entire universe, That is the True. That is the Self. Thou art That! (Chandogya Upanishad 6:12:3)

The Self (*atman, jiva, jivatman*) is an eternal indestructible " expression" or mode" of Brahman like a photon of light from the Sun, and shares with Brahman the essential attributes of *Existence* (**sat**), *Consciousness* (**cit)** and *Bliss* (**anandam**). Just as a glass of water from the ocean shares all the qualities of the ocean but is distinctly different from it in quantity and potentiality, so is the *atman* related to the *Brahman*. The Self is characterized by consciousness. The Self is naturally immortal, having no beginning and no end to its being. It is atomic in size and undergoes 'embodiment' which means that it takes birth in the bodies of plants, animals, humans, or gods. In the embodied state the *atman* is technically referred to as *"jiva"*. In embodiment, the natural attributive consciousness has become obscured and veiled by ignorance and delusion. The jiva mistakenly identifies itself with the physical body /mind complex and this is the basis of all sorrow and delusion. All sentient beings are essentially non-different from each other in their Essence Nature. In the embodied state the difference between them is the degree of ignorance predominating. Animals are in a greater mode of ignorance then are human beings.

The body is merely a vehicle and an instrument whereby the Self (*jiva*) experiences the world and reaps the rewards of its past actions (*Karma*). The body is produced through sex and decays after death in accordance with the biophysical laws. The Self however transmigrates to another embryo to continue its spiritual evolution. The Self is the subjective "I" that is referred to, in relation to the objective universe of experience. It is the "subject" which experiences the body and mind as "objects". The body is constantly changing, but that consciousness which does not change, but perceives the physical changes is the *jiva*. In both a corpse and a living body all the physical structures, organs and chemicals are present, in the case of a corpse the life force is absent. That conscious *life force* is the Self which has continued its transmigration. The number of jivas is infinite and innumerable – like grains of sand on a beach, all are in various stages of transmigration.

The Non-dualists claim that there is absolute identity between the individual Self (*jivatman*) and the Supreme Self (*paramatman*) . In the embodied state there is an 'apparent' difference which is due to ignorance (*avidya*). When one realizes this identity through the practice of meditation the unification (*yoga*) is re-established. All notions of individuality disappear and the individual consciousness becomes *united* with the cosmic consciousness. The other schools teach various degrees of difference between *Isvara* and the *jivas*.

It is important to note the difference in the Hindu concept of Self and Abrahamic coalition's (Christians, Jews and Muslims) concept of *soul*. For the Abrahamic coalition, the soul is something "created" by God that is "given" to the individual. God and Satan both "contend" for the soul. One can "sell" one's soul to the devil and one can "redeem" one's soul. Animals although fully conscious and sharing many attributes with humans nevertheless do not "possess" souls. The three faiths even debated up until the middle ages whether women had souls! In Hinduism the *atman* or Self is eternal and all pervading and it is the very essence (the *Brahma-nature* or the *Buddha-nature*) of a sentient being. The thing possessed by, controlled by and manipulated by a sentient being is it's physical mind/body complex. For the Abrahamic coalition one's primary identification is with the physical body (which some theologians say will be resurrected at some time in the future). For Hindus the primary identification is the Self our true Essence Nature — the body being its vehicle.

The individual is composed of three bodies (tri-kaya) which are interlaced and function as one: —

1. The gross physical body
2. The mental body (astral body)
3. The Causal body which is the subconscious reservoir of all mental impressions and Karma.

The Self (*atman*) uses these three as vehicles for its self-expression. The gross physical body is changed each time the Self is born but the astral and the causal bodies remain with the Self until final liberation.

The Atman

Not inwardly cognitive, not outwardly cognitive, not both-wise cognitive,
Not an undifferentiated mass of consciousness, not cognitive, not non-cognitive,
Unseen, with which there can be no dealing, ungraspable, devoid of characteristics:
Inconceivable, indefinable, its sole essence being the consciousness of its own Self,
The cessation of proliferation, tranquil, blissful, without a second; [such] they consider is the fourth [state of being]. This is the Atman [Self]. This should be realised. Mandukya Upanishad 7

3. Samsara – The Flow of Life

"One who entertains desires, thinking of them is born again here and there on account of those desires". (Mundukya Upanishad 3:2:2)

The fundamental doctrine of Sanatana Dharma and its offshoots — Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism is the doctrine of reincarnation or transmigration. This process is called *Samsara* which translates as "the ocean of relative existence" or the "flow of life". It is the process of the jiva's involution back to Brahman — its true state. The general paradigm of this doctrine is as follows: —

The Darwinian concept of evolution of the species, where one form of life evolves into another ever more complex form, may be appropriate to the physical body, but Hinduism applies a radically opposite theory to the evolution of consciousness.

The consciousness which is perfect, eternal and blissful "devolves" into the lowest species becoming more and more gross, and then begins a process of involution towards it's natural and essential state of being known as *sat - chit - ananda* — existence, consciousness and bliss absolute . It passes through various lower life forms until the attainment of the human state which is the highest and most desirable birth in the Universe. Birth in the heavenly realms or as gods (*Devas*) is not desirable because it is only in the human form that one can work out one's Karma and can achieve liberation through Self-realisation.

There are some schools and gurus which teach that retrogressive rebirth as an animal or a plant is an option, but this is doubtful due to the fact that animals are not bound by the moral law of Karma and Karma is the driving force of rebirth.

4. Karma – The Economy of Action

"a person consists of desires. As is one's desire so is one's will; as is the will so is the deed that is done, and one's deeds conditions what one will become". (Br. U. 4:5)

1. The jiva which is a distinguishable ray of the Supreme Brahman somehow experiences a "fall from knowledge" — it becomes separated as it were, from the Godhead. How and why this occurs is the ultimate Mystery. The Vedas intimate that it is because of *desire* — a desire to experience duality.

2. The jiva then begins its *samsaric* journey by devolving into the lowest forms of existence such as plants in which state its natural consciousness is contracted to the maximum.

3. Slowly through a process of spiritual *involution* the jiva develops and matures, expanding its consciousness through the various lower forms of life — insects and animals until it finally reaches the human stage. This primary transmigration through the lower life forms takes about 8,400,000 births according to tradition. This is a natural and progressive process because these life forms have no concept of right and wrong or the ability to make moral choices, and therefore no Karma. Animals are not responsible for their actions, they are motivated by instinct and the drive to fulfil their natural needs of sustenance, security and procreation.

4. The secondary transmigration which is an active and self-directed process, starts with the human birth. All people in every society upon the earth have concepts of right and wrong and laws governing their relationships with each other, based upon a perception of justice. There are universal values and truths which every social group in every place in the world has access to. Hinduism teaches that Isvara cares about all beings in the cosmos and makes provision for their spiritual development and unfoldment by revealing guidelines in a manner appropriate to those particular individuals. The human evolution (becoming involved in samsara) and involution (becoming liberated from samsara) is governed by the Law of Karma (see next section).

5. Finally the Supreme Goal of human existence which is Liberation from the continued round of births and deaths is obtained. Tradition says that from the lowest type of human birth to the birth in which spiritual awareness arises, one passes through approximately 100,000 births. So we see that this is a very long and arduous process, from the moment of spiritual arousal to the actual achievement of enlightenment and liberation can still take numerous births. So our sages have always exhorted us not to waste this precious human birth which is so rare.

Karma is the most basic doctrine of Sanatana Dharma and a thorough understanding of the dynamics of Karma is essential for any degree of Spiritual advancement. Sanatana Dharma takes for granted that there is order pervading the universe. Karma is the doctrine of the economy of action. The word *Karma* means 'action' and refers to the entire cycle of action and its consequences. Every action in addition to its material goal, produces a moral consequence which manifests as either joy or sorrow. Whatever we put out into the universe we get back in equal measure. All positive actions produce happiness and all negative actions result in suffering. This law operates whether we are aware of it or not. It is the process by which we shape our own destinies and build up our own reality. Through ignorance we bind ourselves by selfish actions, feelings or thoughts. As long as our actions are directed towards self gratification alone, there is not the slightest possibility of working towards liberation from the cycle of reincarnation. Even the smallest thought or act has consequences which are not settled with death.

Cause and Effect

In this life we experience the effect of our past actions, and often feel resentful that we are now suffering for the course of action set into motion by *someone else.* But when one looks at life from the point of view of immortality, and the Self as an eternal imperishable spiritual atom, then everything falls into a pattern of cause and effect. Karma, as the law of spiritual dynamics, makes us self-reliant beings with the realization that we can never escape responsibility. We can never plead ignorance of the law, nor take the attitude — "this time it won't matter!" In fact the effect is inherent in the cause and therefore the two are in fact one continuum. In the inviolability of the law lies our potential freedom. It enables us to modify, change and remold our character which is the result of our past lives, and to create our future character in greater perfection — improving on our mistakes from the past, knowing that not one single iota of effort goes to waste. Objections are often raised that the doctrine of Karma is unjust because we are now suffering for actions we have done in the past of which we have no recollection. Recollection of the exact cause is irrelevant, the causes may be manifold, but the effect in ourselves and in others is either joy or sorrow. Every single action that we do potentially has a threefold effect — it either makes someone happy or sad or leaves them feeling indifferent. Actions which cause indifference do not have much of a karmic effect. Actions which cause either sorrow or joy to others will rebound upon the doer.

Predestination & Karma

Karma is often misunderstood as a synonym for destiny or fate. Karma is neither of these — it is a cosmic law which negates any possibility of luck, good fortune, or chance. Behind every fortuitous opportunity or apparent stroke of luck lies the energy which we ourselves have generated. Likewise behind every loss and misfortune lies the negative energy which we ourselves have created. We are powerless to change the circumstances in which we find ourselves, and to alter what actually happens to us, but we have complete freedom to determine

how we will deal with each and every situation that arise, and turn it into a means of progression or retrogression. Predestination, fate or destiny implies that there is an external force which is imposing its own agenda onto us. Karma is the law whereby we create and experience our own agendas. We have the power to visualize, plan, work for and achieve our own certain future.

Dynamics of Karma.

The actual working out of the law of Karma is extremely complex, including millions of fine permutations and tunings affecting the lives of all of those around us and everyone that we have ever known. All these dynamics are controlled by the Devas (Cosmic Forces) of Karma — the Nine Planets (Navagraha). But there are certain basic principles which we need to understand. We are all acting on three different realms; physical, emotional and mental, with energies appropriate to each realm. Physical actions determine our physical environment, our emotional life revolves around our family, friends and associates and determines our interaction with them, and our world of thoughts, goals and aspirations determine how we interact with the world around us and ultimately understand ourselves. All these three energies together make up our character.

Karma & Sin

Sin as such is very much a Judeo/Christo/Islamic concept which is basically defined as an offence against God. For Christians all humans are born with original sin which requires rectification and redemption. These concepts are totally alien to Hinduism. Although some Sanskrit words are often translated as "sin" they bear no similarity to the Abrahamic coalition's concept of sin. The seminal term **papa** often translated as sin, can be defined as any act that obstructs one's return to Brahman. It is summed up as follows; —

> Those actions which cause hurt and suffering to any other living beings (animals included) are to be considered as *papa* (sin, demerit, unskillful action); and *punya* (virtue, merit, skilful action) is defined as those actions which bring joy and happiness to others. (Mahabharata)

Sometimes we hurt others intentionally, but mostly we do it through error or due to lack of attention or consideration. All "sin" is traceable to individual accountability — the "human error factor". The inclination to cause suffering to others (sin) is not original, or part of our essential nature, but *adventitious*, or *circumstantial*. "Sin" in Hinduism is not the central spiritual problem but a symptom of ignorance and it's resultant misidentification with the body/mind complex — Ignorance (nescience) is the real spiritual problem. The Self is essentially pure and divine and different from the physical body. The accumulated actions of the past birth (*Karma*) give rise to the individual tendencies (*Samskara*) in this birth, either to act virtuously or un-virtuously. These tendencies or natural dispositions are seated deep in the subconscious mind.

No action can in fact be said to be neutral; every word, deed or thought has an effect. Our thoughts affect us directly while our speech and physical actions affect our environment.

The entire moral theology of Hinduism rests upon the concept of "benefit of all beings" (*loka-sangraha*). Motivation or intention is the deciding factor of the moral nature of an action. Motivation which centers on the welfare of others, is of the nature of spirituality, goodness and purity, whereas motivation which centers upon the individual, is negative and leads to suffering, and bondage to the cycle of births and deaths.

The Ten Forms of "Sin".

"Sin", remember is an *unskilled* use of action, a lack of spiritual understanding which causes one to transgress the Cosmic Laws (Rita), and the means of performing unskillful actions are three:— the mind, the speech and actions.

The unskillful use of thought is manifest in

1. thinking harmful thoughts directed towards others,
2. clinging to irrational and erroneous views and doctrines.

The unskillful use of speech is

3. lying,
4. slandering,
5. gossiping,
6. abusing others and
7. giving false advice or teachings.

The unskillful use of action is

8. causing physical injury to other living beings,
9. sexual misconduct and
10. not rendering assistance in time of need.

All well-directed virtuous actions leads to spiritual development and happiness, all unskillful actions retard spiritual growth and produce unhappiness and delay the unfolding of our *Brahma-nature*.

Three types of Karma

There are three types of Karma including both negative and positive;

§ 1. *Sanchita Karma*; — the accumulated results of acts which have been committed in the past lives and are waiting to come to fruition in the future.

§ 2. *Prarabdha Karma;* — acts done in the past which have resulted in the circumstances of the present incarnation and are causing all the joys and sorrows which we are now experiencing.

§ 3. *Kriyamana Karma;* — All the actions which are now being performed; the results of which will be experienced at a later date and will condition the circumstances of the next incarnation.

Prarabdha Karma is beyond the control of the individual and the results which have produced our present conditions have to be born with patience. It is like the seed which has been planted in the past and is now flowering. *Sanchita Karma* is like seed which has been stored and can be remitted through the Grace of the Guru or Isvara. The *Kriyamana Karma* or the present actions are entirely under the control of the individual, and must be performed with the utmost awareness that each individual is the author of his/her own destiny and each and every action, no matter how trivial will have an effect, unless all actions and their consequences are surrendered unto Isvara. Once surrendered, all actions are purified and everything is done as service to Isvara alone and thus even mundane actions become the vehicle of Liberation.

Therapeutic Suffering

The doctrine of Karma explains the universal experience and problem of suffering and why good people suffer. There are three factors in suffering;— the person who is suffering, an agent which is the cause of suffering such as another sentient being, thing, condition etc., and the degree of suffering. Once we have understood the nature of the Self as it really is and understood the dynamic of actions and their consequences, then the agent of suffering becomes incidental and secondary. This understanding then helps us to turn our suffering into a vehicle for positive spiritual growth and enlightenment. We no longer bear any anger or resentment towards the person or thing that is seen to be causing the suffering because they are merely agents of our own Karma. It is on this basis and this basis alone that we can truly love our "enemy" and return love for hurt, compassion for thoughtlessness. When the experience of suffering is thus understood, it becomes an opportunity for self-development and spiritual transformation and its intensity is greatly diminished. The suffering and happiness of each person is in exact proportion to his/her deeds. And even suffering is meant to correct and rehabilitate one. Suffering is the source of great lessons and the vehicle of greater understanding and insight, if used with awareness and insight into the law of Karma. In everything good there is the seed of evil, in everything evil there is the seed of good.

The Three Poisons

> To those who are free from desire and anger, who aspire [for Self-realisation] whose minds are controlled, and who have attained self-mastery the Great Nirvana is close at hand. (Gita 5:26)

There are three drives which cause us to perform negative actions which lead to demerit and suffering; they are **Desire** (*Kama*), **Anger** (*Krodha*) and **Greed** (*lobha*). These three are the *three poisons* which retard spiritual growth and are said to be the three gateways to hell.

Desire — primarily and generally refers to the libido which is the strongest drive we have. In more specific terms it refers to the desire which is self-centered or self-referent and directed purely at self-gratification. It is wrongly directed desire which is unhelpful to spiritual progress, and thus prolongs one's existence in Samsara — the cycle of births and deaths.

Aggression — the reaction towards unfulfilled desires and failed expectations one has of others or the feeling of being threatened. This leads to causing injury and hurt to others which in turn results in bad Karma and further suffering. Our sages teach us that a moment's outburst of anger destroys heaps of merit painstakingly accumulated over long periods of time.

Greed — the craving for more beyond the limits of necessity or comfort. Its goal is having and possessing for the sake of possession itself without any personal use or utilization for the benefit to others. Its dynamism lies in the delusive identification with body, possessions and resources and the resultant inability to share them with others and to rejoice at the good fortune of others. It actually manifests as a desire to obstruct the progress and prosperity of others.

All these three poisons have their roots in delusion. **Delusion** (*moha*) is the notion that the mind/body complex is the "self" and that the individual is a unique and separate entity to all others which leads to craving and clinging. This conviction is the very axis on which the wheel of reincarnation revolves. Until we attain enlightenment and realize that we are not the physical complex but eternal spiritual beings which are perfect rays of divinity, and thus interconnected with all life forms, then we will continue indefinitely in bondage to the material nature.

Karma and Grace

Naturally this teaching leads to the question 'What part does Isvara (God) play in this doctrine of Karma' ? The answer is that Isvara acts as the *Dispenser of the fruits of action*. He does not *cause* happiness or sorrow, we ourselves are the cause. He, with perfect justice, hands out exactly what each person deserves according to his/her accumulated unskillful acts *(papa)* or skilful acts *(punya)*. We choose what we want and God grants it with perfect Justice. If we make the wrong choice we can hardly blame God! Karma is considered to be beginningless and it is almost impossible to free oneself from the tangle of actions and reactions by self-effort — it requires hundreds of births in which a concerted and continued effort is made to reach perfection. So it is only through Divine Grace that Liberation from the fetters of Karma which obstruct our path to Self-realization can be achieved quickly. The way of liberation lies in the path of self-surrender. By surrendering to Divine Grace, the accumulated Karma can be eliminated, and to a degree,

through the goodwill of the Guru, but the Karma presently fructifying has to be experienced until it wears out. The Karma that we are presently generating is transformed by our surrendering to the Divine and by our intention to dedicate all our actions to the welfare of all sentient beings — through this act of surrender and self-dedication we can cease the creation of new Karma.

Many readers will now be asking; "Is there free will?" Well the answer is yes and no. None of us chose the circumstances into which we are born. We did not choose our sex, nationality, race or intellectual powers, nor our inherent susceptibility to certain diseases. Even from a materialistic point of view all these conditioning factors are either 'accidents' or they are 'genetic'. From the Hindu point of view everything that we experience in life is our "just desserts". If we cannot trace the cause in this present life we can attribute it to our previous one. We deliberately and freely choose to act in a certain way and this behavior sets up a chain reaction, the consequences of which it is impossible to avoid! One may choose to leap off a cliff or not, but once the fall has begun there is no question about avoiding the inevitable impact! So we have complete free will to act but there is no free will or choice in the experience of the results.

When compared to infinity, the span of human life is a split second. How can the results of this exceedingly short life span mean anything in eternity in terms of the afterlife which is said to be eternal. How does one explain the moral injustices accruing in cases of unmerited suffering. Why does a compassionate God allow innocent people to suffer? Why are people born with handicaps? Why do so many people prosper with relative ease and others live a life of constant sorrow and hardship? Why do the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper? The general explanation of the Abrahamic-coalition is that it is the (capricious) will of God. This doctrine is totally rejected by Sanatana Dharma because God is morally perfect and no negative qualities can be attributed to Him.

Reincarnation and the doctrine of Karma are the only rational explanations for the diverseness of the human condition. Many people would also raise the objection that — "because all suffering is deserved why should one feel pity for a suffering being?". The answer is that compassion is not to be based upon a personal moral judgement of another; it is a spontaneous feeling of empathy which gives rise to the desire to alleviate the suffering, regardless of the cause. Compassion naturally arises in one who is spiritually developed, and should be cultivated in those who are not yet developed.

Forgiveness of Sins

> Completely relinquishing all self-initiated means for your salvation, take refuge in Me alone. I will release you from all your negative Karma (sins), grieve not. (Gita 18:66.)

One may also well ask whether the Law of Karma makes provision for mercy and forgiveness of transgressions? This is again a transference of responsibility to another. We ourselves destroy our own accumulated Karma through the development of wisdom. Wisdom is the greatest purifier. God is an ocean of unconditional love and compassion and cannot bear to see the

suffering of beings and is always ready to forgive them, liberate them and to be reunite with them — they need only realize this and turn towards the Divine, the Divine will then act as the catalyst to eliminate all stored Karma which obstructs our reunion. It must be stressed that in the Hindu view of life, God has not separated Himself from us because no separation actually exists — it is an illusion (*maya*) — we ourselves have created and maintained the fiction of separation. It is therefore up to us to let go of separativeness and realize our inherent ever present oneness with the Divine through a process of self-surrender.

Forgiveness of sins by God is not much stressed in Hinduism because of the concept of the boundless magnanimity and unconditional love and compassion of God who like a mother does not bear grudges and naturally forgives us whether we request it or not. The main point of "requesting forgiveness" for misdemeanors is the acceptance of our error and the resolve not to perform the same act again — a self-corrective management. It is more important to acknowledge and own our failings and foibles and to request forgiveness from those whom we have wronged, rather than requesting God to forgive us.

It is also generally taught that good works (merit) cancel the results of negative actions (demerit). It is preferable to modify and refine one's behavior than it is to pray for forgiveness. The load of accumulated Karma that we carry from birth to birth can be reduced by the performance of charity, social service, pilgrimages, and acts of piety and devotion. During rites of absolution and sanctification (*punyaha vachanam*) one prays for the elimination of the negative dispositions and attainment of a purified and regenerate mind which in turn will take an active interest in serving God through working for the welfare of other beings.

5. Nirvana – Liberation

"The desire for liberation arises in human beings at the end of many births through the ripening of their past virtuous conduct". (Paingala Upanishad 2:11)

When the five cognitive senses together with the mind cease (from their normal activities) and the intellect itself does not stir, that, they say, is the Highest State. (paramam gatim) Katha Up 4:3:10.

Nirvana means the cessation of the cycle of rebirth. It is Liberation (*Moksha* or *Mukti*) from the state of embodiment in the material world. Emancipation from Karma and its results, and subsequent Liberation from the cycle of rebirth can be obtained in several ways, for there are

many ways to Liberation and Beatitude. Each individual must essentially follow his/her own path and work out his/her own way to Moksha under the guidance of a competent Spiritual Preceptor (*Guru*) according to the Cosmic Laws (*Dharma*) and his/her own disposition and stage of spiritual development. There are two views about the processes to Nirvana: —

1. **Personal effort** — Liberation as a self-initiated process facilitated through the framework of
   - Mystical union born of reflection and meditation . (*Jñana Yoga*),
   - Through good works done without personal motive. (*Karma Yoga*)
   - Through devotion to God. (*Bhakti Yoga*)

2. **The Taking of Refuge** — the act of self-surrender to God (*Prapatti, Saranagati*) and reliance upon His Grace.

The first three means are 'self-initiated' activities but the fourth is 'God-initiated'. The Blessed Lord has stated quite clearly in the Bhagavad Gita 18;66 that He will liberate all those who simply surrender to Him having abandoned all self-initiated attempts at emancipation. This is known as *Prapatti* — the Way of Self-surrender.

Through meditation, works and/or devotional service to God we actively burn up our Karmas through our own personal spiritual practice, and ascend towards the Godhead. Through 'Surrender' we acknowledge our inability as frail human beings to effect our own liberation and rely totally upon the love and compassion of God. This surrendered state of mind then naturally leads one to reflection, devotion and good works — so all four ways are included in the taking of refuge.

Different sects stress one or other of these paths to Liberation but it is conceded that the only difference between them is the degree of ease and practicability — dependant upon the disposition, development stage and capacity of the individual.

Liberation in Hinduism is *individual* not collective. There is no "elect group". All beings are destined for and will ultimately achieve reunion with the Divine in view of the fact that every being is an inseparable mode of the Divine expression and as such is already perfect. All jivas are photons of the Divine Light and therefore eternal separation from the Divine is inconceivable. Sanatana Dharma teaches that Liberation is simply a matter of realizing our true essential nature — not achieving a state of heavenly well-being. The difference is with regard to the timing not the "potential".

Nature of Liberation.

Nirvana means "the state of non-return". It is a positive state of Being, Consciousness, and Bliss. Sanatana Dharma recognizes four grades or stages of Beatitude or final bliss (called:— *Moksha*,

Mukti, *Nirvana*, *Paramapada etc.*) which is the goal of spiritual practice. All are transcendental states and are thus by definition free from any material limitations of space and time.

1. Dwelling as an individual in the presence of the Lord and participation in His divine Nature and activities. (*salokya*)
2. Attainment of a divine form and state similar to that of the Divine but without the power to create universes. (*sarupya*)
3. Attainment of a state of close proximity to the Godhead and the eternal contemplation of the Beatific Vision. (*samipya*)
4. Complete unification with the Godhead and the cessation of all notion of individuality. (*sayujya*)

> When all the desires stationed in the heart are dispensed with one becomes liberated, undoubtedly, even while living. Garuda Purana 1:236: 12

6. Creation/ Projection

> Those who know the duration of the [Cosmic] day and night understand that a day and a night of Brahma each last for a thousand Yugas (total of 8,640,000,000 years).
>
> All the manifested entities come forth from the unmanifest at the coming of the day of Brahma, at the coming of the night they are dissolved into that alone which is known as the Unmanifest. (Gita 7:17-18)
>
> All beings, O Arjuna, are absorbed into My Nature (Prakrti) at the end of a cycle of time (311,040,000,000,000 years). Again I send them forth at the beginning of a new cycle. (Gita 9:7)

The Sacred Scriptures teach us that the scheme of creation or rather "projection" of the Universe is not a linear process as is taught by the Abrahamic coalition, but cyclic; as is every dynamic process in the cosmos that we can observe; such as time itself, the seasons, the life cycles of plants, animals and humans. The orbits of the planets and even those of the atoms are all cyclic.

The dynamic sequence of the Universe consists of —

(a) coming into being — expansion from a single point (*bindu*),
(b) existence and
(c) dissolution/transformation — contraction back into the point from where it originated (the Big Crunch!).

Everything in the universe is under the sway of these three forces which are eternally at work. There is a metaphysical principle that, the microcosm corresponds exactly to the macrocosm — Isvara projects the universe from within Himself as the spider projects its web. He enters into it, sustains and preserves the Universe and then dissolves it into His own Being. Then according to His will, He again projects the Universe, and so on for all eternity.

Isvara is the efficient cause as well as the material cause of the universe. He projects the universe from within Himself and then enters into it — through His power of omnipresence. He pervades the entire cosmos from within and without. Nothing can be created from nothing, so Isvara Himself is the material substance from which the physical universe arises, it exists in Isvara and is withdrawn back into Isvara at the end of the Creation cycle. The process of Emmanation/Projection is followed by a period of withdrawal and then re-projection. The Hindu theory of cosmology is one of a Unified Field, in which matter, the Godhead and the individual Selves (jivas) are all modification of the one Being – *Brahman.*

The purpose of the manifestation of the Universe is essentially a mystery. Isvara has no external compulsion or inner necessity to project because He is full and complete in Himself. Seeing that Isvara is complete in Himself and Absolute, there is nothing which He needs to accomplish and certainly no desires which He needs to fulfil from somewhere or something outside of His own Being. So the Hindu sages have taught that the purpose of the Universal Projection is Sport (*Lila*). A spontaneous outburst of energy aimed at Self-expression. When one engages in a game with oneself, there is nothing to achieve or any competitiveness— it is an end in itself.

> Just as a spider envelops itself with fibres emanating from its own body, so does the one God bring forth the world substance from out of His own being and covers Himself therewith. May that Lord grant us the sense of unity with Him! (Svetashvatara Upanishad 4)

7. Dharma – Right Living

Eating, sleep, fear and procreation are common to both animals and humans; Dharma alone is specific to humans, without Dharma, they are equal to animals. (hitopadesha)

If our activities while still or moving, conscious or unconscious are not for the benefit of other beings, they are equal to the actions of beasts.. (Garuda Purana)

Dharma is the foundational concept in Hinduism and its offshoots and is contained in the name *Sanatana Dharma*. The word *Dharma* is derived from the root *dhr* which means 'to support' or 'to maintain'; that which is the essential nature of a being and the means of its moral and spiritual support is called its *Dharma.* There are two elements to Dharma (1) knowledge and (2) works. Knowledge refers to that which leads one to a realization of one's true nature as an inseparable aspect or "expression" of the divine essence, and establishes one's natural and eternal relationship with the Godhead, and helps one to know that Brahman is the focal element of Dharma. The second element is morality which is our personal code of conduct and ethics which governs one's dealings with others. The source of Dharma is fourfold:—

> *The Veda, tradition, the conduct of virtuous people and one's own conscience; this is declared to be the fourfold source of Dharma, right before one's eyes. (Manu 2;12)*

There are several definitions of Dharma given in the Sacred Texts but all are elaboration upon the same core theme which can be reduced to three concepts:—

> *The Eternal Duty (Sanatana Dharma) towards all creatures is the absence of malevolence (prejudice) towards them in thought, deed or word, and to practice compassion and generosity towards them. (Mahabharata Vana Parva 297;35)*

The malevolence or prejudice that we bear towards others arises from judgmental attitudes based upon ignorance and a sense of separateness. Therefore the first stage of Dharma practice is to rid ourselves of all preconceived ideas and judgmental attitudes. Once we have suspended all judgment we can then begin the development of unconditional love and compassion which naturally result in generosity, charity and service to all. The greatest obstacle to spiritual, social and universal wellbeing is the *double standard* factor. We see everything from a selfish, subjective, personal stand point. Our religious, social and political values are the best, our feelings, aspirations, failures and disappointments are greater than any one else's. Our possessions are more important than those of others and our acts can be fully justified. The practice of Dharma

seeks to turn "Selfishness" into "Altruism" where the others are seen as important as, if not more, than ourselves.

The expanded form of Dharma according to the Padma Purana has 12 components; 6 relating to self development and 6 relating to relationship with "others" —

Purity (*saucham*) — The first requisite of Dharma and the foundation is the cultivation of a pure and healthy body and hence a pure and healthy mind. It is incumbent upon the Hindu to bathe twice a day or at least every morning and maintain good hygiene. The rules of purity are quite complex and cover everything from physical hygiene and eating to ritual purification after such occasions as death and birth.

Worship (*yajña*) — worship of God through the rituals that are prescribed in the various sacred literatures (i.e. Vedas and Agamas)

Austerity (*tapah*) — refers to simple living and the practice of meditation.

Self restraint (*damah*) — one should strive to control one's desires and behavior, avoid excesses and cultivate self- discipline which is the basis of civilisation.

Study (*svadhyaya*) — this concept refers to the Scriptural Study (investigation into the Truth) through the Primary Scriptures — the Vedas and the Upanishads, the Secondary Scriptures — Puranas, and the epics — the Mahabharata and Ramayana, as well as self-study or introspection, self analysis and cultivation of insight into one's true self.

Contentment (*shanti*) — development of a peaceful disposition; being content with little and accepting whatever comes to one; be it pleasant or unpleasant, with equanimity.

Nonviolence (*Ahimsa*) — one should refrain from causing any injury to other living beings through word, deed or thought. The premise is that the Self in all beings is the same and therefore one should treat all other beings with the utmost compassion as one would deal with oneself. One may of course, as a last resort, defend oneself through violence if there is no other way. One may also use violence to defend a woman or a child from a murderous assailant.

Truth (*satyam*) — practice of truth in speech and harmony in action at all times. One should speak only that which is true and agreeable, one should not needlessly say things that are hurtful even though they may be the truth. One's actions should be in concordance with what one professes. The practice of truth includes in it such virtues as straightforwardness, frankness, absence of deviousness and malice and so forth.

Generosity (*danam*) — this has a twofold reference; one is the giving of charity to the needy as well as social works for the benefit of society as a whole. The other reference is to the gift of fearlessness to all creatures through cultivation of complete non-injury (*ahimsa*) to any being in word, deed, or thought.

Non stealing (*asteya*) — one should refrain from taking anything that is not given.

Forgiveness (*kshama*) — and forbearance which comes from the cultivation of loving kindness to all beings.

Veneration for preceptors (*gurusevana*) — the term guru (preceptor) covers the parents, teachers, guides, elders and all those who teach something however insignificant it may be.

In actual fact *Dharma* encompasses all our duties and obligations to the society and world around us. The idea of 'individuality' is offensive to Sanatana Dharma. Everyone exists as part of a social group and each member of the group has certain duties and obligations towards every other member of the group. Once these duties are fulfilled then that which is our Right will come to us. In modern materialist society the emphasis is on *individual rights* and little if anything is ever heard about *collective duties.* In fact 'rights' are now taken for granted and demanded as a matter of course.

A great teacher of the 13th century in South India — Peria-acchan-Pillai taught that there are four categories of people in this world;

1 *The lowest of the low* — one who does evil in return for the good received;
2 *The low* — one who does not give anything in return for good rendered; or one who lives at the expense of others.
3 *The average* — one whose help is commensurate with the help received, that is one who feels that others too should live as well as oneself.
4 *The best* — one who does good to others without expecting anything in return or one who feels that others should live comfortably even at the expense of one's own comforts.

Universal Dharma.

There is an objective ethical code (*loka-Dharma*) which has been revealed through Scripture and is applicable to every society and all humankind. One is assured of spiritual progress and the Divine Grace if one follows this code (Manu 7;92) regardless of one's theological or philosophical convictions or lack thereof.

1. Contentment
2. Forgiveness
3. Self-control
4. Truthfulness
5. Abstention from stealing and cheating
6. Observing physical and mental purity
7. Having sexual relations with one's spouse only
8. Pursuit of knowledge [concerning the world]
9. Pursuit of wisdom [concerning the Ultimate Truth]
10. Abstention from anger

Part 2

General Information

Thus far we have dealt with the basic doctrines of Hinduism. In this section we shall proceed to explain topics of interest which have a bearing upon discussions that arise through inter-faith dialogue and cultural exchanges. These topics have particularly relevance for an understanding of Hinduism by those of a Judeo-Christo-Islamic background.

1. Scriptures

Hinduism has no single Scripture like the Bible or the Qur'an. There is an amazing library of sacred texts, all of which have some degree of authority for some particular sect, and not all sects accept the same Scriptures! The sacred texts are divided into three categories; Primary, Secondary and Tertiary.

Primary Scriptures — Vedas & Agamas

The Primary texts are sub-divided into two categories *Nigama* (authoritative) and *Agama* (experiential). The *Nigama* are the Vedas. All sects of Sanatana Dharma accept the *Vedas* as the Highest Scriptural Authority. The Vedas (which means "Knowledge") were composed in the Sanskrit language over 6000 years ago. They are the written records of the mystical experiences of great sages called *Rishis* who directly realized the highest Truth and were fully enlightened beings.

The corpus of the Veda is sub-divided into four books (Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharvana) which contain hymns (*Samhita*) and philosophical speculation (*Upanishad*) about the nature of the Ultimate Reality. (**see table on page …..)** These writings are considered by modern scholars to be the oldest literary compilations known to mankind. The Veda is considered by Hindus to be timeless and eternal and contains all that there is to know about Brahman and Dharma. The existence of a Supreme Reality may be inferred by deductive reasoning, but actual *knowledge* of That, Its qualities, activities and teachings come only from the Veda. The Veda is always studied in the original Sanskrit text which has remained unchanged through millennia.

Every effort at transmitting ideas contains the possibility of misunderstanding. There is no absolute truth in the communicative media — only various degrees of ambiguity. This principle is even more applicable to the Spiritual Truths which are not readily verifiable from our every day knowledge and experience. The True Nature of the Godhead is essentially inconceivable and thus also incommunicable, except through the use of abstruse metaphors and analogies. The

wisdom of the Vedas is transmitted through an elaborate code of symbols which are often unintelligible at face value and require interpretation by a living and enlightened preceptor. The interpretation (exegesis) of the Scriptures is therefore governed by strict rules and guidelines which have been set down thousands of years ago. No self-interpretation is permitted and the guidance of a teaching authority – **Guru** is of paramount importance.

The most important sections of the Vedas are those known as the *Upanishads* which deal directly with the nature of Brahman and the Self. These are the only Vedic texts which are studied and taught extensively in the Hindu world.

The Veda itself is not generally accessible to the laity for the same reason that quantum physics is not accessible to those who lack the education in the necessary areas. In order to study the Vedas one has to have a Preceptor, a knowledge of Sanskrit as well as a thorough grounding in *Mimamsa* which are the canons of exegesis (the rules and guidelines for interpretation).

The *Agamas* are also known as the Tantras and have equal authority with the Vedas but are more user-friendly. These texts are more concerned with the practical and experiential aspects of religious belief and practice. The texts are divided into three groups:— the *Saiva,* the *Vaishnava* and the *Shakta*. The Balinese Hindus have there own particular Agama known as *Agama Bali* which is unique.

The *Agamas* or *Tantras* contain the directions, rules and regulations for temple building, sculpturing of icons, festivals etc. and all other liturgical matters as well as programs for personal spiritual development.

Secondary Scriptures — Smrtis & Sutras

There are several types of Secondary Scriptures which all serve to explain and elaborate the core teachings of the Vedas, these are the canons of sacred and secular law (*Dharma Sutras*) and are the field of professional priest lawyers and teachers. These are;—

Oral Law (Smrti) — the Smrtis are books dealing with sacred laws (Canon Law) as well as judicial law, composed by various great Lawgivers such as Manu. These sages do not usually claim the status of Revelation for their teachings and interpretations but do assert that the Vedas are their source. Each sage headed a Vedic school and each developed a set of laws suitable to the particular current sociopolitical circumstances. The Smrtis are usually more or less unanimous on most major legal issues but there is quite a wide latitude of difference on many minor points.

Domestic Guides (Grhya-sutras) — contain rules and regulations about domestic conduct; the duties of householders, ceremonies, sacraments etc. This is the field of study of domestic priests (*purohitas*).

Tertiary Scriptures — Puranas & Itihasas

Tradition (Puranas) are encyclopedias of spiritual and mundane information — they are elaborate "commentaries" on the Vedas and contain every type of knowledge from cosmology to gardening and horse breeding. There are eighteen major Puranas and these are freely available in translation for the use of clergy and especially the laity.

Epics (Itihasas). There are two great epics which have shaped the cultural life of the entire South East Asia region. They are the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. These are epic stories containing historic as well as legendary accounts of ancient Kings, as well as philosophical discourses, elaboration on certain doctrinal points, hymns and parables. The other two texts which fall under this category are *Harivamsha* and the *Yoga Vasistha*.

Validity of the Sacred Texts.

Hindu epistemology (theory of knowledge) posits three means of knowing:—

Direct experience,
Inference and
Verbal or scriptural testimony.

Scripture as Revelation is concerned with things which are unknowable by direct experience or inference. The nature of the Godhead, the means to re-unification with It, and the moral & ethical laws of the universe and right action are only known through the means of the Scripture. Scriptural testimony in order to be valid and relevant must fulfil three conditions:—

1. It must be interpreted according to reason
2. It should not contradict direct, objective perception or inference.
3. It should be internally consistent.
4. It should supply us with knowledge not accessible through other sources.

Scripture is not considered to be infallible in all matters, or even authoritative in every instance — only with regard to those concepts which are beyond the grasp of the rational mind. Thus there is no conflict between the Vedas and Science. Science deals with the empirical universe and the Vedas deal with the transcendental as well as the holistic Universe — the universe of matter as well as spirit and our place in it. The content of Scripture is further divided into four categories:—

1. *Theology and Injunctions* — passages which describe the attributes of God and give injunctions in the matters of right living and ethics (*Dharma*). This is the kernel of Scripture all else is the husk.
2. *Eulogistic or Declamatory texts* — these are texts which exhort to greater virtue and piety by offering rewards of heaven or good rebirth, and texts which discourage wickedness by

prospects of hellfire and brimstone. These are not to be taken seriously but as a bolster for irresolute Selves. Like a child who is *bribed* to take a medication with promises of sweets or toys.

3. *Doxology* — prayers, hymns and ritual formulae for use in the liturgy.

4. *Parables & homilies* — fables and legends of the doings of gods, sages, princes and heroes which usually have some moral principle as their objective. They may or may not be actual historical accounts. The form of these stories is irrelevant, what matters is the content and message.

The Bhagavad Gita

This is a unique work which is said to be the recorded dialogue between the Incarnation of the Supreme Godhead — Krishna and his friend and disciple Arjuna on a chariot on the field of battle. Because it is the direct teaching of God it comes under the category of *Nigama* or Veda, and since it is also a manual of spiritual exercises it can also be classified as an *Agama*. Whatever its classification it has become one of the most universally popular of all the Hindu Scriptures and has captured the imagination of many western philosophers and theologians. If any book can be said to be the "Hindu Bible" this would be it. Many have denounced it as espousing war, but the "field of battle" is a metaphor for our lives, where a struggle takes place on a daily basis. The teachings contained in this text address our personal struggles, failures, disappointments and fears, and shows us how to attain peace and harmony in our lives — in the here and now.

2. Grace and Works

> Neither here [in this world] nor there [in the next], O Arjuna, is there destruction for him.
> For verily, no one who does good, my son, ever comes to grief. (Gita 6:40)

There is an endless controversy among Christian schools between justification (salvation) by works and justification by faith. Some would believe that it is good actions alone which will lead one to Final Beatitude, and some stress faith alone. Then there are many degrees of permutation between these two extreme views.

Hindus believe that for any real degree of spiritual progress Divine Grace is essential. There are three types of Grace: (1) the Grace of the Self (2) the Grace of the Guru and (3) the Grace of God.

Firstly we need to develop a loving, accepting and compassionate relationship with ourselves before we can really embark on any serious spiritual journey. Cultivating an optimistic and

positive attitude towards ourselves is the prerequisite preparation for the spiritual journey. Without resolving all issues of low self-esteem, self-loathing and guilt we are bound to fail to win either the Grace of the Guru or the grace of God and there can be no progress towards our spiritual unfoldment.

The Grace of the Guru can be earned through our dedication to the path, to study and the application of the teachings in daily life.

The Grace of God cannot be *earned*, it is a gift freely given to all beings regardless of religious beliefs, sect, gender, species or sexual orientation. All that is required by God is an 'excuse' (*vyaja*) to shower His mercy and Grace. And the nature of that *excuse* depends entirely upon God Himself! But since God has enjoined upon us charity, compassion, austerity, worship etc. we can therefore assume with some certainty, that these "good works" can act as an *excuse* for the bestowal of Grace. In any case good works certainly have a result of their own regardless of faith or dogmatic persuasion.

According to the Personalists the Supreme Lord has an active interest in reunion with all jivas. More than the jiva wishes to be reunited with Isvara, Isvara longs to be reunited with the jiva. The lord will not rest until every Self has been liberated, and thus He has been, and shall continue working throughout eternity for the liberation of all beings.

There are two types of Grace;

- **Kripa** – awakens in one the desire to pursue the path to liberation and to serve the Lord in loving devotion, and
- **Prasada** – grants release from the cycle of rebirth. Isvara Himself is the Efficient Cause as well as the Instrumental Cause of Grace.

The apportioning of Grace by Isvara to any individual cannot be known with any degree of certainty. It is given by Isvara to whom He pleases. Isvara does not consult with anyone! The fact that one is attracted to spiritual life is considered to be evidence of the type of Grace known as *Kripa*. Once given, Grace is never withdrawn. Falling from spiritual life or 'backsliding' is not an indication that Grace has been withdrawn but merely an indication of the power of the Ego and *Maya* (the deluding potency of the material world). The *Ego* which is defined as 'an idea of separate individual and autonomous existence' is the greatest hurdle to God-realization.

> This Supreme Being cannot be attained by instruction, nor by intellectual power, nor even through much hearing. It is to be attained only by the one whom He chooses. To such a one He reveals His own nature. (Katha Up. 2:23)

3. The Family & Society

Just as all creatures exist depending on air, so do all social orders depend on the householder. (Manu 3:77)

Hinduism divides the ideal society into four social groups that follow four stations of life pursuing the four goals of human endeavor.

The Four Goals of Life

The four goals of human endeavor or motivating factors are:—

1. **Dharma** — the pursuit of right living, virtue and duty to ourselves and society.
2. **Artha** — profession, material prosperity, power, security and wellbeing, all of which must be based upon the codes of ethics taught in Dharma.
3. **Kama** — recreation, pleasure, aesthetics, sense gratification the highest form of which is sexual enjoyment and love.
4. **Moksha** — liberation from the cycle of births and deaths (transmigration).

The ideal Hindu life embraces all these four aims in balanced measure and all being firmly based on the principles of duty and properness (*Dharma*). For most people living in modern society there are only two aims — material prosperity-power and pleasure, hence the pervading feeling of alienation and lack of meaning in life. In order to achieve the most complete earthly happiness all these four paths have to be in harmonized and integrated into our lives. Dharma and Moksha add meaning to our earthly existence and differentiate us from the animal realm.

The Four Stations

According to the Vedic scheme the ideal life is divided into four stations;—

1. *Student* — in this stage one learns everything one can to equip oneself for the journey of life and the attainment of the four previously mentioned goals. In the Student stage the stress is on the study of Dharma as well as acquiring a general and tertiary education.
2. *Householder* — after studentship, one marries and enters into the order of householder which is the best of the four orders and is the support of the other three. The family is the cornerstone of society and the purpose of marriage is procreation. The focus now shifts to prosperity — *Artha* and love/romance — *Kama*, but without neglecting *Dharma*.

3. *Retiree* — when one's children are all old enough to take care of themselves, one begins the process of withdrawal from worldly life. The focus now rests on *Dharma* and *Moksha* — liberation.
4. *Renunciate* — when one is psychologically and spirituallyprepared, one takes the final step of preparation for death by renouncing the family and world and retiring to a monastery to spend the last years in the pursuit of *Moksha.*

In the present age it is said that there are really only two stations; the householders and the monastics.

The Four Social Divisions

The division of society into 4 distinct social orders exists and has existed in almost every civilized society. What differentiates the Western 'class' system from the Hindu 'caste' system is that in the West there is relative class mobility — meaning that with education and professional advancement one can move from one social order into another whereas in India it was extremely difficult, though not unknown to change from one caste to another, or for a whole caste to elevate itself.

When observing any organized and structured society we can distinguish clearly between four classes —

- The Intelligentsia (*Brahmins*) — the thinkers, teachers, poets, writers, scholars and intellectuals of the society.
- The Bureaucrats (*Kshatriyas*) — politicians, administrators, managers, executives, soldiers, police and all government officials.
- The Entrepreneurs (*Vaishyas*) — traders, businessmen, merchants, artisans, farmers etc.
- The Proletariat (*Sudras*) — unskilled and semiskilled workers, laborers etc.

There are several levels of "Caste" which are generally lumped together. There are the social divisions based upon one's birth into a particular family — this is known as *jati*. Then there are the same four divisions based upon one's inherent character, regardless of family categorization, known as *varna*. Then there is the further subdivision into vocation or occupation known as *vrtti.* So one may be born into a specific caste, with a character pertaining to another caste and work in a job unrelated to either. Caste as a method of social structuring is far more complex than simple racial segregation as was practiced in America or South Africa. Caste in Indian society was like the Professional Guilds of Medieval Europe. Each one had its own administrative and ethical structure, and people married and kept the art or profession within the group/caste. Hinduism teaches that all jobs, occupations and professions are 'callings' and one should work in that profession which is suited to one's character and abilities. There is no disgrace in menial work and all work should ideally be done as service to God.

Inter-caste social restrictions in actual fact, applied only to intermarriage and inter-dining. These two activities were carried out only with people from the same or compatible castes. Though it has, admittedly, many faults, it is the caste system which has preserved the integrity of Sanatana Dharma over millennia. Sanatana Dharma has existed from time immemorial *because of* its social structure, in spite of all the attempts by invaders and foreigners to destroy the Dharma. Through a 800 years of war, conquest, repression and wholesale destruction of temples and religious institutes, Sanatana Dharma has survived. For 250 years European Christian Imperialists have worked assiduously through aggressive indoctrination, enticement, legislation, force and deception to convert Hindus, yet compared to their successes in the rest of the world their attempts in India have failed dismally!

There are many facets of the caste system which are purely social in nature and are not sanctioned by the Dharma. There has been, and still is, much oppression and wickedness perpetrated in the name of the caste system. However this is a social phenomena and cannot be attributed to the teachings of the Dharma. Just as the racial tensions in America or Europe cannot be attributed to the teachings of Christianity.

Today the caste system is practiced in its rigid form only in the villages. Most expatriate Hindu communities know the system only in name and faint memory.

Untouchability.

This is surely the greatest injustice which the caste-system produced. The untouchables are social groups who initially by their objectionable lifestyle (as scavengers, butchers, hunters etc.) were excluded from social intercourse with the "caste" Hindus. Then as the system became entrenched, the fact of birth in an untouchable community without an obnoxious lifestyle still earned one the malevolence of many caste Hindus. This situation unfortunately still exists in many parts of India to this day and one hastens to add is not a social convention that is supported by the religious institutions. The sooner we obliterate untouchability the better.

4. Icons & Temples

> Without a form how can God be meditated upon? If he is completely formless, where will the mind fix itself? When there is nothing for the mind to attach itself to it will slip away from meditation, or will glide into a state of slumber. Therefore the wise will meditate on some form, remembering however that it is an indirect method, a particularization or indication of that which is completely formless. (Vishnu Samhita 29: 55 57)

The images or icons Hindus worship are material manifestations of Isvara. Isvara is omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent and an ocean of compassion. In order to bestow His Grace upon us and

in response to our prayers, by a fraction of His limitless potency, He answers the prayers of His devotees and manifests and reveals Himself in these specially consecrated icons in order to bestow Grace and to respond to their devotion.

There are three views concerning icons in Modern Hinduism:

- The reformist movements like the Arya Samaj under the influence of Protestantism have totally rejected the use of icons and attempt to relate to God as an abstract impersonal spirit.

- The Impersonalists regard the icons as mere symbols upon which subtle ideas are superimposed. They condone the use of icons as an aid to contemplation. The ultimate goal is to dispense with the use of icons and to merge into the undifferentiated Cosmic Consciousness which is devoid of all name and form.

- The Personalists regard the icons as the Catholics do the Eucharist. Through the process of consecration they are *transubstantiated* into the physical presence of Isvara. A consecrated icon is not merely a symbol but the actual and real manifestation of Isvara upon earth. Isvara is Omnipresent, but His presence is more focused in a consecrated icon than anywhere else.

The consecrated icon is housed in a sacred space known as a 'temple' which is built strictly according to prescribed measurements. The temple represents the human body which is the real abode of the Supreme Lord. The Lord dwells within the heart of every living being! The temple is treated as the abode of Isvara upon earth and the daily activities in the temple are centered around the sacred presence of the Lord in the icon. He is given all the treatment that a king would receive. In the early hours of the morning the Lord is awoken, He is given a bath, clothed, decorated, offerings of food are made, court is held, and at the end of the day He is put to rest. All these activities, performed by the priests as the personal servants of Isvara, continue daily regardless of the presence of devotees.

The temple and its priests as well as the monastery and its monks are regarded by Hindus as Westerners regard their football teams! Every team has its devotees and fans who religiously attend every match and totally identify with their team and favorite players. The team plays and the spectators watch and cheer them on, much of what goes on the football-field as well as backstage is a mystery to the majority of spectators who can never participate, yet every match sees large turn-outs of devoted fans, who purchase trinkets and memorabilia and have icons of their favorite players up on their walls at home! The great release of emotion during and after football matches is probably the closest that most fans every get to a mystical experience.

5. Polytheism & Pantheism

> Then Narayana, the Supreme Being desired 'I shall produce offspring'. From Him emanates the Life Breath, mind and the sense organs, ether, air, fire, water, and the earth that supports all. From Him emanate all the gods, from Him alone do they proceed and prosper. In Him are they reabsorbed. (Narayana Up. 1)

Polytheism is defined as the belief in numerous gods. The entities commonly referred to in English as 'gods' we call *Devas* which means *Beings-of-light*. They are exactly the same entities known in the Semitic religions as the angels which have administrative and protective functions in the universe under the direction of the One Supreme Godhead. They are capable of being propitiated and can grant limited material and spiritual favors but only Isvara Himself can grant Liberation.

The "gods" can be viewed as mates in the Town Hall. They are good for getting building permits but can do very little regarding the major issues of life, death and Liberation.

Ganesha, Sarasvati, Subrahmania and all the other deities that are commonly seen in lithographs in Hindu homes and businesses are in fact personifications of various *attributes* of the Godhead. Ganesha is the personification of wisdom, Sarasvati of learning, Subrahmania of skilful means and so on. They are not beings separate from the Supreme Godhead, they are His innumerable facets.

Pantheism is defined as identification of God with the Universe (all is God and God is all). Among the many Hindu philosophical schools of thought various views about the relationship of God to the Universe are taught. The Personalists teach that God is related to the Universe as the Self is to the Body. The universe is completely different from God but together they form a whole. The universe is insentient and is totally dependant upon God for its creation and existence. The Impersonalists teach that the universe is in fact an illusion which is superimposed upon God who is the only reality. So when a Hindu philosopher says "everything is God" it means that in essence only God really exists and the universe only has an *apparent* existence. Behind the multifarious transient material manifestations lies the abiding, Ultimate Reality which is God. God projects the creation from within Himself, He pervades the entire creation, but the Universe is NOT identical with God — this concept is known as Pan-en-theism.

> You are woman, You are man, You are the youth and the maiden too, You are the old person who totters along on the staff. You are manifest with a face everywhere. You are the blue bird and also the green parrot. You are the thundercloud, the seasons and the seas. Having no beginning you abide in all things through omnipresence. From You all worlds have been born. (Svetashvatar Upanishad 5)

6. Eschatology - Final Things

Sanatana Dharma teaches that death is a natural state and is the result of being born. Everything that is born must die and everything that dies will certainly be reborn (Bhagavad Gita 2,27). There is nothing to fear, as all created things must eventually meet with destruction and the bodies decay and disintegrate according to the natural biological laws of dissolution. But the conscious Self is eternal and does not die when the body dies. In actual fact, death is one of the greatest opportunities for enlightenment and liberation. The predominant mind-state at the moment of death conditions our next rebirth. So to die awake with awareness in a spiritual ambience is the most fortunate death!

Hinduism teaches the existence of both heaven and purgatory. Heaven being a *state* of superlative enjoyment and purgatory a *state* of extreme suffering. Mythologically these two are represented as realms, but philosophically they are taught to be the projections of the mind only. An extraordinarily wicked person who has constantly and consistently caused suffering to others internalizes all this negativity and thus creates a state of enormous suffering; conversely one who has been exceptionally virtuous creates the conditions for their own delight. The Scriptures known as the Puranas give detailed mythological accounts of the hells and the suffering meted out to recalcitrant sinners. The punishments are suited to the gravity of the negative Karma and is designed to rehabilitate the errant ones. But seeing that all conditioned states and places are impermanent, whatever the condition of the Self after death, whether it be hellish or heavenly, all will be reborn here on earth to continue their spiritual evolution.

Those *jivas* who are neither very selfish nor very altruistic (which includes the vast majority of people) incarnate soon after death in other bodies according to their merit. The Personalists believe that the jivas that have completely and sincerely taken refuge in Isvara and have practiced Dharma during their lifetimes achieve Liberation. The Impersonalist view is that the cycle of rebirth continues until one realizes one's true identity as being essentially ONE with Brahman .

Liberation is a transcendental purely spiritual state beyond those of both hell and heaven and is the only permanent state.

Faith

Unlike the Abrahamic coalition Hinduism denies the efficacy of *faith* as a means for attaining Self-realization and beatitude. The great saint-philosopher Ramanuja defines Faith (*sraddha*) as an unshakeable conviction that a specific practice will lead to the Goal. Faith for the follower of Sanatana Dharma is a conviction which is grounded in logic and reason and must be consistent

as far as possible with reality as it is perceived. Faith is the firm conviction of the existence of the Atman (individual Self) its identity with the Paramatman (Supreme Self) and the efficacy of Dharma to remove obstacles to this reunification.

The absence of faith as a "firm conviction" does not lead to eternal damnation but simply to rebirth. Whatever faith one has, in whatever form of the Divine, the Lord Himself strengthens that faith and causes one ultimately to come to Him. (Bhagavad Gita 4.11) Isvara reciprocates in whatever way the sincere seeker approaches Him. The existence of faith and devotion to Isvara is due to meritorious works and spiritual practices done in the previous life. The ultimate key to Liberation is total surrender to God and to all cosmic forces that are at play.

7. Theodicy – The problem of Evil

Hinduism does not hold with the *real* substantive existence of absolute evil (personified as Satan). The entire Universe is a projection of a Perfect Brahman who is ONE without a second, upon which the entire cosmos and everything in it is dependant and subservient. Because the Universe is a projection from within the very Being of the Divine it must therefore itself be Divine as the Veda declares "All this is nothing but Brahman" (*sarvam khalvidam brahma*). Everything that can be seen, heard about and experienced is nothing but Brahman — the Divine. 'Evil' is not a living entity but a moral condition based upon relativity and conditioned by time, place and circumstance. The entire spectrum of human experience and consciousness is qualified by contrasts — pairs of opposites. Good and evil, hot and cold, joy and sorrow, success and failure; these are all conditioned and finite, as is the universe of time and space, matter and energy. These are all relative concepts which are limited to the personal or group psycho-physical experience. "Good" is a judgmental term which describes something as acceptable to our social group or something of which one personally approves. "Evil" is that which the individual or group reject as unacceptable. The Divine Godhead and the transcendental state are beyond all human capacity to evaluate as well as beyond all conditioned dualities and are therefore indescribable. Our experience is limited to the "pairs of opposites" the dichotomy of conditioned and relative experience, and expression of that experience to comparisons. Everything in the world is conditioned by time, place, circumstance and participants. Nothing is of itself either good or evil. The state executes a murderer in order to protect society. A murderer kills a victim for self-satisfaction. It is the *motive* which determines the moral character of an action, not the action itself. The basis of Judeo-Christian morality is "do unto others as you would have then do unto you" or "what is hateful to you, do not do to others". The basis for Hindu morality is;

> *virtue is that which brings joy to other living beings,*
> *sin is that which brings suffering to any living being.*

There is no Arch-demon in the form of a Lucifer who is at odds with God and contending for souls! The "anti-gods" often called "demons" of Hindu mythology are beings that are

characterized by egoism and selfishness; they will also eventually all be redeemed and liberated and no being will be separated from the Godhead — the Divine Nature, for eternity, no matter how many millions of births it may take, since each and every living entity is a ray of the Divine, a photon of light from the Sun which is God.

The "divine" and the "non-divine".

Human nature is a duality of "divine" and "non-divine" natures — inclinations and drives. How does one know which one of these intrinsic natures is predominating in one's psyche. This subject is dealt with at great length in the Bhagavad Gita Chapter 16. The symptoms associated with these two natures are as follows;

One possessing the divine nature is destined for liberation from the cycle of rebirth and one characterized by the non-divine is destined for bondage and repeated rebirth. These characteristics are the touchstone by which all people and experiences can be evaluated.

The Veda declares that the world is perfect as it is;

> This is perfect and That is Perfect. From the Perfect arises the perfect; When the perfect is taken from the Perfect what remains is perfect.

Types of Sentient beings

There are six types of sentient (conscious) beings in the Universe dwelling in 6 realms;— animals, hell-beings, hungry ghosts, humans, gods and anti-gods. A person can take birth in any one of these species. In fact these 6 realms exist simultaneously here and now. A realm is called a *loka* in Sanskrit which means "a way of seeing reality". We ourselves create these realms of existence in our present lives.

1. The animal-realm mind-state (***tiryak***) is characterized by the creation of defensive boundaries, by ignorance and laziness and an obsession with self and self-preservation.
2. The hellish mind state (***naraki***) is characterized by grief, self-pity, victimism, inability to let go of one's personal suffering.
3. The hungry ghost mind state (***preta***) is characterized by intense attachment, greed and inability to share with others or to rejoice in the good fortune of others.
4. The titans (***Asuras*** or anti-gods) are characterized by pride, ego-centricism and self-gratification.
5. The gods (***Devas*** — lit. "Shinning Ones") are characterized by compassion, goodness and pride.

6. The Human (***manushya***) mind is a mixture Some human beings display the characteristics of gods and others like mass murderers or some dictators are totally demonic. All categories of living beings are given countless opportunities for liberation. Spiritual teachers enter into all the 6 realms to help liberate the countless beings that are suffering there.

Hindu mythology is replete with accounts of wars between the gods and the anti-gods. No Hindu theologian would accept these as historical accounts! They are interpreted as the internal spiritual battle of the Self striving to overcome the "demonic" forces of desire, anger, greed, pride, envy, delusion, ignorance, etc. led by the "invincible" *Arch-demon* — the ego. It is the ego which separates the jiva from Isvara, and once this enemy has been identified and destroyed one can attain the beatific vision.

8. Sexual Matters

Sex is a perfectly natural act and is the highest form of enjoyment on the physical level. Through the act of procreation a couple actually participate in the act of universal creation. The penis (*lingam*) and the womb (*yoni*) are the tools of creation on this earthly plane and are therefore appropriate symbols of the act of creation on a Universal and Cosmic level. Sex is, along with hunger and thirst one of the most powerful driving forces of the human psyche. So this tremendous energy can also be harnessed and directed toward spiritual development. Repressing the sex drive is unnatural and leads to all kind of psychological problems. Many Traditional Hindu temples, particularly in the South of India have images of copulating couples carved on pillars, walls and on the facades of the temples. These carvings are there for the entertainment of the pilgrims as well as depicting the highest joy of physical union, which is a tiny fraction of the supernal bliss of union with the Divine.

Sexual Relations

Unlike the Semitic religions where sex is often regarded a necessary "evil" meant for procreation alone, Sanatana Dharma teaches that sex is good, wholesome and enjoyable and can be indulged in for pure pleasure. Sacred literature like the Kama Sutra of international renown, was written by the sages in order to help us to realize the greatest potential for sensual enjoyment. There are of course strict codes of ethics governing sexual relations. Prohibited incestuous relations include not only parents and siblings but also aunts, uncles, and cousins as well as all members of the extended family and even clan!

Promiscuity

There is no word for *promiscuity* in Sanskrit, but generally Hindus are conservative. Sex before marriage is discouraged; the reason being paternity problems and social security for the girl. According to the ancient codes of law an illegitimate child is one born of an adulterous relationship where the woman is married to someone else. A child born out of wedlock to an unmarried girl is not 'illegitimate' according to Hindu law and must be adopted by the man who marries the mother. But in traditional Hindu society it is extremely difficult if not impossible for a girl with a child to find a husband, and a girl without a husband to support her will lead a very unhappy and insecure life in Indian society.

In a modern western social setting there is no religious ruling on the subject of premarital sex, it is up to the individuals concerned. Young people are to be encouraged to do whatever they are doing with compassion, kindness, understanding and acceptance of full responsibility for their actions. Exploiting another person simply for one's own physical and emotional gratification, is to be discouraged at all cost.

Prostitution

> A king should maintain teams of courtesans and Patronise their arts of music and dance. He should give sufficient protection to the science of archery and Economics too. (Brhaspati Nitisara 4:26)

In ancient India prostitutes (*veshyas, ganikas*) had a respectable place in society; like that of the geishas of Japan. They were 'public' women who were well educated in the arts, in music and dance. They were indispensable at all public/religious functions, and in all religious as well as civic processions were always in the vanguard. The sages realized thousands of years ago that many men have insatiable sexual appetites which could place a strain upon marital relations thus threatening the family unit, and by extension the entire fabric of society. So in their wisdom provision was made for such persons to gratify their desires, thus contributing to the stability of the family and society. Prostitution is seen merely as a fact of human life and as an economic transaction involving mutually consenting adults and therefore unworthy of any moral judgement. Ancient Indian Kings regulated and taxed the industry.

Homosexuality

> Self with its knowledge being obscured by ignorance; is sometimes embodied as a man, sometimes as a woman, sometimes as a homosexual. According to its deeds and the nature it acquires thereby, it may be born as a Deva, a human or a beast. (Srimad Bhagavatam 4.29.29.)

On the subject of sex it needs to be mentioned that "gay" issues that are constantly receiving attention in the western media and political agendas are a nonevent in Hinduism. The Sacred Scriptures inform us that all individuals are born with a propensity to be either heterosexual or homosexual. Homosexuals (both male and female) are *born* this way due to Karmic circumstances, they are not *create*d by social circumstances, nor is there a conscious *choic*e in the matter of sexual orientation. The question of moral evil or wickedness does not arise in the case of natural disposition. The victimization, discrimination or marginalisation of gays which occurs in western society due to Judeo/Christo/Islamic moral precepts is wrong and contradicts the teachings of the Dharma. The sages and preceptors have been concerned with the serious issues of human suffering, enlightenment and liberation not with genital activity! They have never addressed this issue, and none of the law givers have made a big deal about it. In fact there is no mention of homosexuality in any of the catalogues of "sins" that one finds in the Hindu Scriptures. As long as neither is a victim it remains a matter of no consequence and not worthy of any serious mental expenditure.

All gay relationships should conform with the general principles governing all relationships — there should be honesty, kindness, compassion, mutual growth etc.

Transvestites/ trans-sexuals

Popularly known as "eunuchs" (hijras) due to their either emasculating themselves or simply cross-dressing. These people also have a place in mainstream Hindu society. They can be seen all over India at social and religious functions, dancing and singing as their presence is regarded as a good men by some communities. They have a patron goddess known as Bauchara Mata, and a pilgrimage center in Gujerat. There are also annual festivals in various places in India attended by thousands of "eunuchs".

9. Astrology

Astrology is a branch of the Vedas and is thus a Divine science which was cognized by great sages for the guidance of humankind. Astrology shows us the karmic potential which each of us has brought over from the previous life. It is the greatest tool for self-realization, self-mastery and spiritual development. It harmonizes with and completes the doctrine that Isvara is perfect, free from all imputation of indifference, partiality or capriciousness. After having placed us in the wilderness of life to work out our Karmas, He has then given us a manual and guidelines to understand ourselves, our situation and the best way of reaching the goal — going back to Godhead.

Through the sensible application of this wonderful science we can achieve happiness in this world and the world to come. Astrologers in Hindu society are the traditional psychologists, psycho-analysts and counselors and therapists. They are consulted on every major issue in life, and they decide the timings of all important events such as marriages, house moving, opening

businesses etc. Compatibility charts are analyzed between prospective marriage partners as well as business partners and even between gurus and their disciples.

Astrology is a language and so therefore the question of *believing* is ludicrous. Through the interpretation of the symbols used in Astrology we can attain insight into ourselves, an understanding of the universe around us and can reach a state of spiritual balance and harmony with nature & society.

10. Sanatana Dharma & other Faiths

Krishna is pleased with one who listens to all discourses on religion (Dharma), and reverences all the gods, who is free from jealousy and has subdued anger. (Vishnu Dharmottara Purana 1:58)

It is frequently claimed by many Hindu teachers and their followers that all religions are equal and that all paths lead to the same goal. But this is not correct. What Hindus do recognise is that there is some truth, validity and intrinsic worth in every religious system. No religion has the monopoly on Truth or Morality. All are approaching what they see as the Truth in diverse ways. Every one chooses to follow a religion that is suited to his/her temperament, stage of development and capacity for understanding. The problem is that not every religion teaches the same goal. For devout Christians, Jews and Muslims the goal is getting to a sort of hedonistic heaven — of permanent and eternal enjoyment, which in Hinduism is an inferior and temporary state, an impermanent "time out" from reincarnation. On the other hand the mystics of all religions teach a "union" with the Divine. From the standpoint of God everything is perfect as it is and nothing needs to be changed. From the human standpoint following religions which teach an impermanent goal is simply compounding one's suffering and future birth in *samsara*. It is not the religion which needs to be changed but one's expectations. If one wants to sincerely enter the spiritual stream, one needs to abandon the materialistic motive of self-righteousness and personal enjoyment in some heavenly realm.

All religions are to be respected and accommodated, and all spirituality is to be accepted as valid **as long as** the practices and beliefs also encompass universal compassion, and non-injury to any living being. For a religious system to be considered "valid" from the Hindu point of view, it must fulfill certain conditions: 1. It must be founded on Truth (*satyam*) . 2. It must be objectively universally beneficial (*shivam*). 3. It must have an aesthetic component (*sundaram*). 4. It must bring peace to the practitioner & to others (*shanti*) and it must be a source of great satisfaction (*santosha*).

> *Abstention from injury, truthfulness, justice, compassion, self-restraint, monogamy, amiability, modesty and patience, the practice of these virtues is the best of all spiritual paths, thus declared Manu the Great Lawgiver (Mahabharata Santi Parva.)*

11. Preaching & Converting

Hinduism is not an actively proselytizing faith. At the beginning of the Christian Era the entire South East Asian region up to Borneo and including parts of Vietnam and Southern China professed Sanatana Dharma. Conversion in the Hindu context is by the process of absorption of the belief system on the part of the aspirant. The Sacred Law (Dharma) is not binding on non-Hindus, but whatever they choose to follow will bring them merit.

Dharma Teaching falls into two categories; Public and Private. Public teaching is given in public venues and includes legends, stories, parables and homilies on Dharma in general, commentaries of the epics and general philosophical concepts. Private teaching of the inner wisdom, is done to select disciples and aspirants. There is no instant salvation, the spiritual path is long and arduous (according to the Katha Upanishad; like a "sharpened razor's edge!") and requires much practice and work on self-transformation before the goal is reached. One does not become a Doctor by registering at a medical college! One does not attain salvation by simply subscribing to one belief system or another!

We see no need to convert others because each and every person is pursuing the path according to their conditioning. Some people are in a spiritual kindergarten, some in pre-school, and some in tertiary spiritual education. Each person advancing at their own pace. If God is omnipotent He can accept our worship and prayer in whatever way He chooses. If God is omnipresent we can worship Him in any way or place we choose. If God is omniscient He knows the sincerity of our hearts and our innermost thoughts without us having to verbalize them. Therefore there is no need to actively proselytize. If some one wishes to join Santana Dharma as their chosen path to liberation they are welcome.

12. Sanatana Dharma & the Environment

> *The entire universe and everything in it, animate and inanimate, is His. Let us not covet anything. Let us treat everything around us reverently, as custodians. We have no charter for dominion. All wealth is commonwealth. Let us enjoy all the resources but never appropriate anything as our own. .(Isa Upanishad 1:1)*

The matter of the environment is a very relevant and much discussed issue of late. So what is the environmental impact of Hinduism as compared to that of other religious systems? The environmental attitude of the Abrahamic coalition is one of exploitation justified by the Biblical teaching that only humans have souls, and humankind is master over all he sees and everything in the world is for the use of humankind. The earth *(Bhu Devi*) is envisioned to be a goddess and

one of the two consorts of Lord Vishnu the preserver of the trinity. The Earth therefore needs to be treated as a goddess with love and veneration.

The Hindu attitude is one of symbiosis. Every living thing encases a Self which is a photon of Divine Light, from the gods (devas) down to a blade of grass. We are only one of many species that coexists in the universe. We should try to dwell in harmony with all beings; and being the most intelligent, it is our duty to protect and care for all the other weaker species. Orthodox Hindus will refrain from eating meat, because in our innumerable births almost every living creature was at some time related to us. It is also cruel for us to gratify our taste buds on the flesh of other living beings. Meat-eating is unnecessary and incompatible with spiritual life which is based on the concept of love and compassion.

Trees and forests are considered to be sacred and it is forbidden to cut down any tree without good cause. If a tree is to be cut down there is a ritual in which the necessity is explained to the spiritual entities living in the tree and their forgiveness is requested. At the birth as well as the death of an individual there is an injunction to plant a tree. Most Hindus have neglected these beneficial teachings and injunctions and as a result India is now faced with major ecological problems due to the denuding of the forests!

Rivers are all goddesses and reservoirs of water are all sacred places; polluting them is strictly forbidden but due to industrialization and westernisation there are very few unpolluted waterways in India itself today!

13. Sacred Cows

One of the stereotype concepts of Hinduism is the 'holy cow'. In fact whenever Hinduism is mentioned the "holy cows" are trotted out! Cows are not worshipped by Hindus but *venerate*d. They give us milk upon which we and our children are brought up. Their offspring help to plough fields and thresh grain. Their dung is used for plastering floors and for cooking fuel. The cow was in the agrarian age the most precious resource one could have.

It is considered to be cruel and demonic to kill and eat the animal that is a substitute for one's mother and provides us with so much! The Sanskrit word for cow is *pashu*, which also, by extension designates animals in general. By showing love and veneration for the cow we extend it to include all the animal kingdom.

Part 3

The spiritual life

The Tri-factor of Spiritual Practice

Spiritual practice in general consists of three factors as taught in the Bhagavad Gita. These practices are the basic framework for our self-development and Krishna enjoins them upon us to be practiced assiduously for the rest of our lives because it is through these practices that our minds are purified and preparation can be made to achieve enlightenment and reunification with our Divine Natures.

1. Yajña — Sacrifice.

Yajña in its narrow primary sense refers to the ancient Vedic Sacrifices that are now redundant. In its secondary and applied sense it refers to the *Five Great Sacrifice*s which requite the Five Great Debts with which each one of us is born. These are:—

Pitru runa — a debt to the ancestors. The fact of our birth, and the loving care, protection and nurturing of our parents obligates us to them and to our grandparents and all the other members of our family. This debt is discharged by procreation to continue the line, by honoring our parents, seeking their guidance, supporting them, caring for them in their old age and by venerating them and our ancestors after they have died.

***Rishi Run*a** — Our sages (Rishis) have dedicated themselves to the path of enlightenment for the welfare of all beings. These magnanimous sages have passed down their wisdom through their disciples in order that we too may spiritually develop, unfold and progress towards enlightenment. The debt that we owe them is discharged by taking the trouble to study their teachings daily, and to teach them to others. Pursuit of a religious education or at the very least making the attempt at being culturally informed frees one from this intellectual debt.

***Deva Run*a** — The Devas are the cosmic forces which administer and govern the universe under the direction of the Supreme Lord. All these forces of nature and cosmic principles are rewarded by making daily offerings to them to show our gratitude and to help us cultivate an awareness of the underlying cosmic consciousness behind all phenomenal appearances.

Manushya Runa — We are by nature social animals and cannot live in isolation. We are therefore indebted to our fellow humans and have the duty to ensure that they are at least

clothed, fed and sheltered. By welcoming and offering hospitality to strangers and by caring for the poor and the needy whenever the occasion arises, we discharge this social debt. An orthodox Hindu should try to feed a stranger every day. There are three minimal requirements which must be offered to a guest; a seat, water to drink, and kind words.

Bhuta Runa — And lastly we are part of an environment which consists of plant and animal life (bhutas = elementals). This ecosystem is vital to our survival and thus it is our duty to continually protect it. This is done through tree planting programs, correct farming methods and protection of wildlife.

pitru- yajña — the sacrifice to the forefathers.
deva- yajña — the sacrifice to the gods.
brahma- yajña — the sacrifice to the sages.
bhuta- yajña — the sacrifice to the animals.
manushya-yajña — the sacrifice to human beings.

The two dynamic factors of Yajña are:— 1. A sincere feeling of gratitude and 2. The demonstration of that heartfelt gratitude in the making of offerings and performing of service.

The supreme duty of the individual is to strive for spiritual and moral perfection. Every individual is called upon to practice compassion and charity to all living beings every moment of his/her life!

2. Tapas — self-discipline

Gita 17;15 – 17 expounds the threefold discipline of body speech and mind as follows:—

Physical self-discipline

1. The service of the gods, the priests, spiritual teachers and enlightened beings;
2. Personal hygiene and cleanliness of environment.
3. Integrity — harmony of thought and action;
4. Chastity — avoidance of considering others as objects of self-gratification;
5. Non-injury — avoidance of causing pain to any being.

Discipline of speech

1. Disciplined speech should not cause disturbance to others,
2. It should be true, agreeable and intended for the benefit of others, and
3. should be best be engaged in the activites of studying and teaching.

Discipline of mind

1. Peace of mind — the absence of anger, desire, delusion, pride, greed:
2. benevolence — being devoted to the good of others;
3. quiescence — a still mind devoid of turbulence;

4. self-restraint — focusing one's thought flow on the object of contemplation;
5. perfect mindfulness — being constantly aware of the Spiritual dimension of life, the underlying Cosmic Force.

Ramanuja says that this threefold self-discipline (Tapas) should be practiced with the utmost faith through deed, speech and thought, having no consideration of any reward and with the conviction that it is to be done simply as adoration of the Supreme Being.

3. Dana — generosity

Generosity is compassion in action; the practice of philanthropy arises from the perception of the same Divine Principle in all beings. When one realizes "sameness" with others, one develops not only empathy with their needs and suffering but also a desire to alleviate that suffering to the extant possible. *Dan*a is service — the giving of one's resources and time to help others whenever and wherever possible.

YOGA

The word yoga is derived from the root 'yuj' which means to join. (The English word 'yoke' comes from the same Indo-Aryan root stem). It refers to the 'uniting' of the Self with its true nature as a 'mode' or "expression" of the Divine. Another meaning is the attaining of harmony, tranquillity and balance. Any process which leads to enlightenment and liberation from the cycle of rebirth is termed a yoga. Yoga is the advanced framework of spiritual discipline and practice which can be used to augment the essential threefold practice mentioned earlier. Yoga is an holistic system of spiritual development — a way of life encompassing every level of our being — physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual.

Yoga can be defined as the methodology of:

- unifying the consciousness
- integrating the personality
- achieving balance and equanimity
- stilling the fluctuations of the mind
- state of deliverance from association with suffering

Yoga & the West.

The form of yoga with which almost everyone is familiar is technically known as *Hatha Yoga*. This is not in itself a spiritual discipline but is merely the preparatory stage. The aim of Hatha Yoga is to promote physical and mental health, prolong life and to attain mastery over the body.

This is achieved through a scientific system of diet, exercise, posture, breathing exercises and techniques to improve concentration.

This program of physical education is based upon the axiom that meditation and spiritual development are dependant upon a healthy and strong physical body and a regulated and harmonized life style.

The Bhagavad Gita which is a dialogue between the prince Arjuna and the incarnated Godhead Krishna, is the handbook of Yoga par excellence. In it are described the four principle Yogic processes which are;—

Karma Yoga — Yoga of unmotivated action.
*Jñana Yog*a — Yoga of intellectualism.
*Bhakti Yog*a — Yoga of devotion
Nyasa Yoga — the way of surrender

1. Karma Yoga — Unification through Action

This term *Karma Yoga* refers to performing one's professional and social activities (Dharma) as taught by the Scriptures; as duty alone, without attachment to the fruits. The yogi worships God through various acts of charity, social work, and by simply doing his job to the best of his ability in accordance with Dharma. In this Yoga there is no motivation other than service to God and all beings, and there is no concern with rewards, esteem, fame, honor or wealth.

2. Jñana Yoga — Unification through Wisdom

Jñana Yoga refers to the classical **Eighth-fold Pat**h (Ashthanga Yoga) as taught by the Sage Patañjali. This is also known as *Raja Yoga* — the 'Royal Yoga' because it is the support of the other types. This system has eight stages;

1. yama — self-restraint; the components of which are;
a. Non injury in word deed or thought to any living being.
b. Truth in speech and the true practice of one's convictions.
c. Abstaining from taking that which is not given,
d. Sexual restraint and the constant mindfulness of the Divine presence in every being.
e. absence of greed and covetousness.

2. niyama — self-regulation;
a. Physica*l* purity
b. Worship of Isvara
c. Austerity

d. study — both of the Scriptures and self-reflection
e. Complete surrender to Isvara.

3. asana (Posture) — this is also known as *Hatha Yog*a and is the most commonly held concept of Yoga in the West. This is an advanced system of physical culture and diet which purifies the body from toxins and prepares it for the other seven stages which culminate in the practice of meditation *(dhyan*a).

4. pranayama — breath-control — an elaborate system of exercises for controlling the breathing. Control of the breathing process exerts a purificatory and tranquilizing effect upon the mind and the psychic nerve centers *(chakras*) and is an adjunct to meditation.

5. pratyahara — withdrawing of the mind from the objects of the senses and focusing it on the Self.

6. dharana — practice of concentration upon an icon, yantra (geometrical design) abstract symbols or any chosen object with or without the use of a mantra.

7. dhyana — meditation proper. Meditation is not a "doing" it is a state of "being". One technically speaking cannot actively meditate, the process of contemplation leads one into a meditative state which is spontaneous. As long as one is *tryin*g to meditate nothing will happen.

8. samadhi — a state of transcendental consciousness in which one is totally absorbed in the object of contemplation to the exclusion of all else. The subject-object awareness disappears.

Bhakti Yoga — Unification through Devotion

Bhakti Yoga is the process of emotional transformation whereby intense love for God is developed. Within the process of devotion there are several relationships that one can cultivate towards God:—

1. The servant — Master relationship in which the devotee visualizes himself/herself as the servant of God and strives to serve Him accordingly in a formal manner. This relationship is most pronounced in Islam.
2. Parent — child. The devotee visualizes God as either the parent or the child figure. In Christianity God is usually addressed as Father. In Hinduism God can either be regarded as Father or Mother and a few great devotees have attained intense love for God visualized as their own child.
3. Friends — a process through which one cultivates love of God through the less formal approach of mateship.

4. Lover — beloved. This is the realization of the great mystics of all faiths. This yoga is also known as Bridal Mysticism in which God is regarded as the Lover or Beloved. It is the highest form of devotion, the most intense and blissful of all relationships one can have with God.

The nine limbs of Bhakti Yoga are:—

1. *Sravan*a — listening to the stories & teachings of the Deity.
2. *Kirtana* — recitation or chanting of the Sacred Name, and mantras.
3. *Smaran*a — constant mindfulness of the Deity.
4. *Pada-sevan*a — service at the feet of the Deity
5. *Arcan*a — making offerings of fruit flowers, incense etc
6. *Vandan*a — prostration
7. *Dasya* — rendering of service to the Deity through some practical work in and around shrines.
8. *Sakhy*a — cultivating friendship with the Deity.
9. *Atma-nivedana* — surrendering oneself completely to the Deity.

4. Nyasa Yoga or Saranagati — The Way of Resignation

The Gita is considered to be the Hindu "bible". In it Lord Krishna gives clear and explicit instructions regarding the three paths of Yoga. After expounding upon them in great detail, and acknowledging their inherent difficulties, in the 18th Chapter Verse 66 the Lord makes the Ultimate Statement (charama shloka);

> *Abandoning all other means (Dharmas) take refuge in me alone;*
> *I will liberate thee from the effect of all sins, grieve not.*

This is the fourth path and the Supreme Means to God according to the Vaishnavas called **Prapatti Dharma** or **Saranagati**. It is not actually a *Yog*a or a *proces*s as such, but a total resignation or surrendering of oneself to God, taking refuge in Him and relying upon His Grace alone. It is the greatest of the Means and includes within it all the others.

Taking refuge in the Divine is the easiest way to God-realization and Liberation. In fact it is the *means par excellence*. It is a means open to all beings and has no restrictions of any kind. There are no restrictions as to time, place or even restrictions as regards states of purity.

So in this present age, when life is so short and filled with all kinds of responsibilities, difficulties and limitations; *surrender to God* is the path of choice. It consists of taking *refug*e in the Supreme

Person; an act of total *self-dedication.* Eve*n ON*E sincere act of self-surrender is enough to elicit the Grace of the Lord.

The only qualification is that the postulant (Prapanna*)* should understand and realize his/her intimate relationship with Isvara. A relationship of complete dependency and subjugation. The only prerequisite for *prapatt*i is a sincere change of heart or contrition on the part of the seeker, and his absolute confidence in the saving grace of the Saviour.

It is not merit which is the operative cause of Grace but the sense of one's unworthiness, the sinfulness of sin, and the inability to follow the three conventional Yogas. The Lord Himself is the way, the means*,* as well as th*e* goa*l* and prapatti is the act of self-surrender to His grace. There is an intimate relationship between the act of self-surrender to the Saviour and the flow of divine grace. Redemption is essentially a justification by faith and not works, although included in the act of Self-surrender is the resolve to perfect one's act as well.

The act of Prapatti consists of 6 components ;

1. The resolve to act according to the Divine Nature and to promote harmony and understanding. It includes the abandonment of ego and entails being benevolently disposed towards all beings based on the firm conviction that the Lord dwells within all beings.

2. Abstaining from acts which are contrary to the Divine Will and which hinder one's spiritual progress back to Godhead such as causing suffering to other sentient beings, abusing the body through drugs, alcohol, smoking etc., killing animals, lying, stealing etc.

3. Realization and acceptance of the absolute impossibility to achieve Liberation through one's own personal efforts in following the three Yogas. It is a feeling of unworthiness and helplessness.

4. Complete faith in the saving Grace of God. It is the faith that He *alone* has the ability to grant release from Samsara and that He *will* fulfil His promise to liberate those who take refuge in Him.

5. The sincere request by the postulant for the Grace and protection of the Lord, abandoning all other *self-initiate*d means.

6. The offering of oneself to the Lord with the conviction that such a dedication is in itself the result of the Grace of God. The postulant is fully aware of Karma; its causes and its results, but there is no act in the entire universe so evil as to exhaust the redemptive grace of God!!

This self-surrender is the absolutely clear and distinct recognition of the omnipotence of mercy and this is the central pivot and ruling motive of Prapatti Dharma. The Yoga of Devotion is the

arduous building up of devotion from below, whereas Saranagati is the descent of Divine Grace into the realm of action.

Tantra

One of the fundamental problems resulting from the traditional Judeo-Christo-Islamic world view is the splitting of the psyche. There is the dichotomy of religion opposed to materiality (mammon). Physical pleasure is seen as incompatible with spiritual growth and the combination of sex and the sacred is like fire and water! Sex in particular (as the original sin in Protestantism) is the source of much guilt & anxiety and its repression has been cited as the cause of many of the western social problems.

Tantra is the practical spiritual discipline which integrates the psyche. It is the path of 'erotic' spirituality. Sensuality and physical pleasure can indeed be used as vehicles for spiritual advancement. It must be pointed out that all Hindu ritual is joyful celebration, and in it, all the five sense are gratified. The sight is gratified by beautiful icons, decorations and by the ritual dances, the ears are gratified by chanting and by music, the sense of smell by incense, the sense of taste by sumptuous feasting, and the sense of touch by ritual gestures, prostrations and ritual positions. Every human activity is sanctified, sacramentalized and offered to the Supreme Being.

The sex drive is one of the most basic and strongest drives in human beings and the act of sex is the cause of the most intense degree of pleasure and depth of emotion. Such being the case this is the act, above all others, which should be sacramentalized. In coitus one experiences the closest form of union with another being, and this in itself is comparable to the union of the individual Self with the Supreme Self. It is the highest form of physical pleasure which is akin to supreme beatitude.

The fundamental "truth" of Sanatana Dharma is not found in doctrine, dogma or formal propositions of any kind; it is in *experience* — a transformation of consciousness. The doctrines are simply the opening stages of a dialogue between teacher and disciple. The aspirant raises questions about the problems of life that she is experiencing and the duty of the guru is to solve the problem by demonstrating it to be devoid of substance and without a base and different to the ultimate reality which is the Self in its true and pristine nature.

The Tantras are a body of esoteric writings which expound the full and practical implications of the formal doctrines of Hinduism. They are concerned with the practical and psychological paradigms for dealing with the fundamental questions of life; Who am I? What am I doing here? and What do I do next? Esoteric knowledge leads to *experiential* realization which in turn brings about a transformation of consciousness and Supreme Beatitude.

The four major human drives are 1. Dharma (ethics/morals), 2. Sex, 3. Power-Prosperity and 4. Self-determination. All desire, like sex, leads to craving, attachment and all the contingent

sufferings of infatuation, jealousy, debilitation and disillusionment. If one tries to get rid of the lustful emotions by puritanically suppressing them, the situation is only aggravated, and the desires will appear in all forms of subtle and deviant ways. Two thousand years of Christianity and still people are battling daily with their libidos and guilt during a large portion of their waking hours!

Tantra solves this problem of a bifurcated psyche by proposing:— "let us experience sexuality in itself, as it is, without any conceptualizing and theorization about it". Through a ritual of identification, the human couple transcend their names, gender and socio-economic identifications and identify themselves with the cosmic pair; Radha and Krishna or Parvati and Siva. The female is the Shakti or active principle and the male is the static one. The male is the Supreme Spirit (Purusha) and the female Mother Natural (Prakrti). There is the immediate experience of the transcendence of pairs of opposites

There are two schools of Tantra;— the esoteric and the exoteric. The exoteric school uses actual sexual acts as part of its ritual whereas the esoteric school uses symbols and symbolic acts. The practice is different but the theory is the same. The esoteric school of Tantra is the most popular and widely practiced form of Tantra in India.

MEDITATION

> *For the unserene, the right disposition [for meditation] does not arise, therefore no meditation is possible, and for one who does not meditate there is no peace; and for one lacking peace where is happiness? (Gita 2:66)*

Meditation and visualization is an important aspect of Tantric practice. There are three forms of Hindu meditation.

- Meditation upon one's Self as the *subject* — existent, consciousness and blissful.
- Meditation upon the Impersonal Absolute and
- Meditation upon a Personal Deity.

§ 1. Meditation upon one's Self is directed at achieving "enlightenment" or an expansion of consciousness and a greater self-awareness in which one realizes one's true nature as an inseparable part of the Godhead or mode of Divinity. The ground of being. There is in fact nothing to be achieved by "spiritual practice" because we are already what we seek!. The spiritual practice is in fact a breaking down, a deconstructing of all our conditioning acquired over thousands of life-times. This realization invariably leads to the next form of meditation.

§ 2. Meditation upon the Impersonal Absolute which is the achievement of a mystical state of absorption with the Godhead. The practitioner after achieving Self- reclusion loses all self-

awareness and sense of individuality and becomes totally absorbed into the Absolute in a state of supernal bliss.

§ 3. Meditation upon a Personal Deity is a process of contemplation upon the form, attributes and glories of a chosen Deity either as male or female. The result of this form of meditation is increased devotion and love for the Divine, a recognition of Divinity in all beings and pervading the entire world. This ultimate realization of the interconectedness of all things leads to increased love and compassion and a desire to serve that Divine through service to all beings.

The first two practices are very difficult for the average person and indeed even most advanced spiritual aspirants never get beyond a state of experiencing perfect relaxation and boundless "peace" and "tranquillity", and indeed this seems to be the greatest benefit from these forms of meditation.

The third form of meditation upon the form and qualities of a Divinity is relatively easy and can be practiced by anyone regardless of their degree of "spiritual" development.

Meditation is basically being alone with oneself in an environment which is free from external stimulation and distractions. Many people cannot cope with sense-deprivation and being alone with their own minds, and if one is not ready to face oneself this can lead to neuroses. Therefore the need for a guide is stressed in all forms of meditation in which one is examining oneself with a view to becoming "enlightened". There is no need for such a guide in the practice of meditation upon the Form and Attributes of a Deity and this is the safest and most productive form of meditation.

Part 4

Liturgy
Rites, Ceremonies & Sacraments

Sanatana Dharma is the most colorful, ritualistic and entertaining of all religions, closely followed by Tibetan Buddhism and the Eastern Orthodox and Catholic churches. Ritual is the expression of an emotion and intellectual conviction. All daily human interaction takes place through the medium of social rituals. Verbal statements are not taken seriously without some form of gesture, some action which demonstrates the emotion. Actions are far stronger than words and 60 - 70 % of our daily communication is in fact nonverbal. So it is in the religious field as well. The theology or philosophy of a religion is expressed through its rituals. Every serious religious group like the Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Buddhists and the Jews have their rituals. The function of Hindu ritual is to express our sincere gratitude for everything that we have — for the pleasant things as well as the unpleasant, because everything happens to us for our own good. The rituals are replete with symbolism and esoteric significance. Every action, every item and every accessory has a meaning behind it. In fact it is not necessary for the layman to have a thorough grounding in the symbology because all these rituals have an effect upon the subconscious mind. Symbols are a language which works independently of the rational mind.

The Hindu Dharma teaches that everyone needs ritual in order to communicate with the Divine. When a lover is invited we spend hours cleaning the home, arranging the flowers and preparing the right ambience, taking an extra long bath, dressing in a seductive manner and wearing perfumes. When the beloved arrives we offer a seat, a drink, we arrange pleasant music, perhaps some incense and then prepare the table for the meal making sure that everything is in order according to our social customs and etiquette. We then serve the meal in the prescribed manner starting with soup and ending with dessert. We then have the appropriate after dinner drink and then adjourn. So it is with the worship of the Supreme Beloved. We invoke Him or Her to be present within the sacred Icon, and then offer services which are called *upacharas* in Sanskrit. The Deity is offered all the services which one would offer to a cherished guest. This process of worshipping the Divine as an invited guest is known as **Puja**.

Fire Worship

Every Hindu sacrament and religious occasion is accompanied by the worship of the fire. The fire is symbol of the Divine and is a vehicle for prayers. The worship of the fire *(Homa)* is accomplished by offering substances like ghee, twigs, fruits, herbs, spices and cooked rice into the fire with the accompaniment of prayers and benedictions. The offerings and the prayers are for the benefit of the entire creation not only the sacrificer.

Fire is a common and universal religious symbol found especially in the Old Testament where God frequently manifests Himself through the medium of fire. From fire we get light and warmth and fire purifies. It is necessary in the preparation of food and the making of tools. So fire is central to psychological life of all human beings. In this sense it is an appropriate symbol for the Godhead which is the ground of all human existence.

The fire is the only element which ascends upwards, thus representing the ascent towards the Divine, the light of wisdom which dispels the darkness of ignorance. It is seen as the meeting point of the physical dimension with the spiritual dimension. Whatever offerings and prayers are made through the medium of fire is immediately apprehended in the spiritual realm.

The Hindu religious calendar is full of holidays, fasts and festivals and it is said that almost everyday of the year is characterized by a temple festival somewhere in India. There are three categories of ritual;

The Daily Liturgy

These are one's own personal daily religious activities of meditation, mantra recitation or formal worship. These are rather impromptu acts which are done according to one's capabilities and understanding. They also vary from family to family and from sect to sect. The simplest form is the daily lighting of a lamp, offering of flowers, water and fruit and the burning of incense at the family altar which is a common feature of every Hindu household.

Occasional Rites

Sometimes in the fulfillment of a vow, as thanks giving or for the wellbeing of one's family and friends or simply in time of distress one performs certain rituals with the aid of a domestic priest. These ceremonies are optional and usually take the form of the rite of Purification (Punyaha Vachanam) or Fire Sacrifices (Yajña) in which clarified butter and other ingredients are offered into a consecrated fire.

Public Rites

Every Hindu temple has an annual 10 day Temple Festival which is the highlight of its liturgical year. These festivals and their attendant rites are not compulsory although it is believed that great merit is obtained by attending and sponsoring them. They are usually characterized by the daily procession of the icon in a chariot or palanquin and the attendant offering of fruits, incense and camphor.

THE SACRAMENTS – SAMSKARAS

The word *Samskara* is one of those words for which there is no single exact corresponding word in the English language. It is usually translated as "a more, a religious rite, ceremony, social observances, formalities and punctilious behavior" But none of these words convey the actual meaning of Samskara. The nearest that one can get is by the use of the word 'Sacrament' which means "a religious ceremony or act regarded as an outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual grace".

According to Manu the great lawgiver the personal Samskaras are thirteen, from conception to death. Beginning from the marriage ceremony they are:

English Equivalent	Sanskrit Term
1. Consummation	Garbhadhana
2. Sanctification of the embryo	Pumsavana
3. Rites for a safe delivery	Simantonnayana
4. Birth rites	Jatakarma
5. Naming ceremony	Namakarana
6. First outing	Niskramana
7. Weaning	Annaprasana
8. Tonsure (first shaving of the head)	Chudakarma
9. Initiation	Upanayana
10. First shaving of the face	Kesanta
11. Graduation	Samavartana
12. Marriage	Vivaha
13. Final rites	Antyesthi

All of life is a ritual and a sacrament, and every phase of one's physical evolution should be sanctified for service to God. The mind is reawakened to the Ultimate Goal in life which is realization of one's true spiritual nature and liberation from the cycle of births and deaths.

The sage Gautama gives eight virtues of the Self, viz., mercy, forbearance, freedom from envy, purity, calmness, right behavior, and freedom from greed and covetousness that need to be cultivated and this is done through a gradual training in spirituality and this training is marked by the Samskaras.

2. *The Spiritual Aim of the Samskaras.*

Sacraments are "an outward visible sign of an inward spiritual grace." For Hindus the Samskaras are a living, vibrant religious experience. Through the compulsory performance of the Samskaras, the great Rishis aimed at evolving a social group uniform in culture and character and having the same ethical ideals and spiritual aims. The Samskaras are a means of molding the personality of the individual. And through this molding one becomes an ideal member of society and an enlightened person. The Rishis were successful to a great extent in their attempt. The Hindus form a peculiar group with an extensive culture. This advanced culture influenced, and was assimilated by the entire South East Asian region and in fact influenced even the great nations of China and Japan.

The Sacraments have generally been observed by all Hindu communities with many variations. Nowadays the sacraments apart from Marriage and the Final rites have been largely neglected by non-Brahmin Hindu communities throughout the world and even amongst the Brahmins it is only a few diehards that still maintain them as enjoined by Scripture. With revivalist movements like the Arya Samaj, and proselytizing movements like ISKCON and the Universal Saiva Church in Hawaii the Samskaras are once again being trundled out of the closet and being administered to all members of the community who request them.

Temples and Priests

isiting temples plays a rather minor role in the religious lives of most Hindus. The temples are seen as the abodes of God upon earth, a kind of spiritual generator. The purpose of visiting the temple is to have a vision of the Deity (*darshana*) and to receive His/Her Grace (*Prasadam*) while regenerating one's spiritual batteries. One never goes to a temple empty handed, the usual offering is a coconut — the breaking of which represents an act of self-surrender to God. Two bananas representing all the pairs of opposites in the world, flowers representing the virtues of compassion, friendliness, loving kindness etc. Incense representing the wish that the Dharma may permeate the universe as the incense smoke does; a betel leaf and nut which is a traditional act of respect to an honored guest. The act of worship consists of offering flowers with the hundred and eight names of the deity — each describing an attribute or theological concept and the waving in a circular motion of a camphor flame which expresses the wish that the entire universe may attain enlightenment and be freed from the darkness of ignorance.

Satsanga — Congregational Services

This Sanskrit term means "the gathering of the followers of truth". It consists of a group of people getting together in either a house or a hall at regular times and singing the name of God together for an hour or so. The chanting is usually accompanied by an harmonium, drums and cymbals. This is the regular form of Religious Service which takes place in the lay Hindu

community. This type of service is conducted by lay men and women without the assistance or participation of the clergy.

The Clergy

The Hindu clergy (Brahmins) are a community which is divided into two categories;

Temple Priests (*archakas*) — men who are especially trained in the art and technology of temple rituals and once consecrated perform the daily rituals in the temple such as bathing and adorning the icons and making the daily offerings of fruit, flowers and incense. Their income is made up of a salary and whatever gratuity the devotees may offer.

Domestic Priests (*purohitas*) — men who have specialized training in domestic rituals and sacraments. They do not have any connection with the temples and usually develop a private practice. Every Hindu family has a family priest as they would a family astrologer and a family doctor. These priests are called upon for all the pastoral work, counseling, teaching, initiating and administering the sacraments. They depend for their income purely on the generosity of their patrons in return for their services. There are usually 2 categories of speciality among domestic priests — those who perform all the sacraments relating to family life — marriage and birth (*purva-karma*), and those who specialize in the rituals of death and post death memorial ceremonies (*apara-karma*).. These division are only found in India and not among Hindu clergy abroad.

Although traditionally women were not allowed to become priests, there is no philosophical or theological reason barring them from this vocation. For centuries the Hindus of Bali have had women priests, and this perhaps reflects their antiquity rather than an innovation.

Nowadays there are specific ashrams in India and abroad which are training women in the priesthood. They are also generally well received by the community.

The Monastics

Renunciation and monasteries (*ashram*s) play an extremely important part in Hinduism. The monks (*sanyasi*s) and nuns (*sanyasini*s) are among the most important sustainers and propagators of the Dharma. One of the basic teachings of Sanatana Dharma is that all suffering is caused by *cravin*g for sense-gratification (consumerism) and *attachmen*t to material possessions, people and circumstances. It therefore follows that renunciation of the material world and consumerism will lead to happiness, and the doctrine of renunciation (*sanyas*a) is one of the pillars of Sanatana Dharma. This renunciation must be a total mental act in order to be effective, physical renunciation without the mental conviction is a waste of time!

The *monastics* are all those men and women who have renounced the world and all formal religious expression. This means that they no longer perform rituals on behalf of themselves or others and restrict their practices to meditation and study of the Upanishads which deal with theological and philosophical matters, and the teaching of Dharma. They may be ex-priests but mostly they are lay people from all four castes who have taken to this calling. Some reside in monastic centers (ashrams or mathams) and some live alone and make their living by begging.

When one becomes disenchanted with material life, and decides to renounce everything one goes off and take up residence in a monastery *(ashram*). There, after leading the life of a celibate neophyte for seven to twelve years one may take the final vows of a monk/nun and don the saffron robe. These vows are irrevocable and taken only after great deliberation. The life of a monk/nun is one of dedication to the spiritual path and the pursuit of enlightenment. All their actions are dedicated to the welfare of all beings.

There is no central ecumenical authority or hierarchy and even the sectarian orders that do exist are more democratic and independent than authoritarian and structured. Most initiated orthodox Hindu priests owe allegiance to a monastic seat (Matham or Pitha) and the pontiff of such a Matham is consulted in matters of religious law and protocol but has no authority over the priests.

Conclusion

Faith must be based upon logic and reason. False ideology must certainly be rejected by every intelligent person. To continue to believe that the earth is flat after the truth has been demonstrated is obviously stupidity. Sanatana Dharma is the 'Science of Religion', a way of life which is dedicated to the sincere objective pursuit of the Truth, the Goal and the Means to attain that goal. We accept truth from wherever it comes and in whatever form. There is an ancient prayer in the Rig Veda which says;

"May noble thoughts come to us from everywhere, free of deceit, unreserved and productive"

All our doctrines are open for investigation, experimentation and refutation. No one is asked to accept anything that contradicts reason, on the contrary we encourage all spiritual aspirants to continually question, reason and meditate. In fact it is an axiom that the unreasonable is unacceptable even though uttered by Brahma himself whereas truth spoken even by a child should be accepted without reserve.